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The Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI) was a bold experiment with the goal of providing greater access to higher education for traditionally underrepresented groups of students. Since 2002, the early college high school (ECHS) concept has resulted in the creation or restructuring of more than 280 schools nationwide. Students who attend ECHS have the opportunity to earn a diploma and a college degree during the four or five years that they attend high school. The schools are typically located on the campus of a college or university.

North Carolina's first ECHS programs opened in 2004. Today, there are 83 ECHS programs in North Carolina, more than any other state. Early college high schools are among the state's top performing schools, with above average graduation rates and high levels of student success in high school and college courses.

While there is a growing body of research related to the Early College High School Initiative, much of the existing literature pertains to the school design and implementation process, the evaluation and success of Early College High School programs, the perceptions of students and teachers, and the unique culture of these schools. Few studies have focused on the leadership of the Early College High School.

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership practices of early college high school principals. Five principals from five different Early College High Schools were included in this multi-site case study. In addition, each principal selected one of his/her colleagues who was also included in the study. The goal of my research was to

understand how the early college high school principal balances the various demands of the position while serving as the only administrator in his/her school. In addition, I sought to identify the practices, strategies and behaviors the principals used which they and/or their colleagues believed to positively impact the graduation rate and/or student achievement at the school.

The results of this study found that Early College High School principals were student-centered leaders who demonstrated several characteristics of servant leadership. They worked collaboratively with teachers and others to monitor and support students. These principals had high expectations, focused on building relationships, empowered teachers to take on leadership roles, and communicated a clear vision for their schools.

EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:
A CLOSER LOOK

by

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I dedicate this doctoral dissertation to my children, Seth and Scottie. Thanks for putting up with me going to school, studying, and spending so many weekends of your youth writing. More importantly, thanks for believing in me. LYM.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Diane Sheppard Hill, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Preparing students for college, work, and life.

—ECHS Motto

One model of high school reform that has seen increased popularity in the last two decades is the Early College High School Initiative (ECHSI). Even though most early college high schools have been in operation 10 years or less, there is a growing body of research at this time about their effectiveness and how they impact public education (Miller, Fleming, & Reed, 2013). Early colleges are small high schools, usually located on community college or university campuses, designed so students can earn both a high school diploma and a college degree or college transfer credits (Jobs for the Future, n.d.). The early college initiative received much attention and praise from educators, policymakers, students and parents, resulting in more than \$120 million in funding from philanthropic organizations including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Berger et al., 2013). There are currently more than 280 schools based on the early college concept in 32 states (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Early college high schools (ECHSs) typically serve 400 or fewer students. Because this setting eliminates the physical transition between high school and college, it “provides students with a personalized learning environment where mastery of subject

matter, rather than matriculation through grade levels, is supported and rewarded” (Kisker, 2006, p. 81). Early college high schools often serve students traditionally underrepresented in post-secondary education, especially first-generation college students. The curriculum includes college courses as part of the high school education. The ECHSI framework incorporates rigor, relevance and relationships, and is “characterized by personalization, respect and responsibility, high expectations, performance-based decision-making, use of technology, common focus, and time to collaborate” (Thompson & Ongaga, 2011, p. 44). These schools have the potential to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for entry into high skill careers (Berger et al., 2013).

Because ECHS programs are designed to serve students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, racial and ethnic minority students, and first-generation college students, there is an inherent social justice influence in the concept (Miller et al., 2013). As the number of ECHSs has grown nationwide, evidence from evaluation reports and other research affirm that the ECHS programs have remained committed to serving the targeted groups of students—those traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education (AIR/SRI, 2009; Edmunds, 2012; Webb & Mayka, 2011). However, the percentage of underrepresented students served in ECHSs has declined over time. Research shows that ECHS students from minority backgrounds dropped from 80% reported during the first year of the initiative, 2002-2003, to 73% for 2004-2005 (AIR/SRI, 2005, 2006). Webb and Mayka studied data on three ECHS graduate cohort groups from 64 schools and reported that 70% of the students enrolled in ECHSs

nationwide in 2010 were minority students. In a quantitative study of 100 different ECHSs using data from Jobs for the Future's Student Information System (SIS), Webb and Gerwin (2014) found that 63% of ECHS students were from racial or ethnic minorities in 2013. However, for most schools, the percentage of ECHSs students from minority backgrounds remained higher than the feeder district's overall percentage (AIR/SRI, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009; Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

ECHS student populations also include a large percentage of students from low income households. In 2010, 59% were from low income families; that number declined to 53% by 2013, but increased to 61% in 2014 (Berger et al., 2013; Webb & Gerwin, 2014; Webb & Mayka, 2011). First generation college students are also a target group of students for ECHSs. In 2007-2008, 46% of ECHS students were the first in their families to attend college. Webb and Mayka (2011) reported that in 2010, approximately 50% of ECHS students were first generation college students, and in 2012, that figure declined to 46% (Berger et al., 2013). However, in 2013, more than 56% of ECHS's students nationally were first-generation college students (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Currently, North Carolina is leading the way with the early college concept, with 83 early college high schools across the state (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2017). North Carolina New Schools (NCNS), a public-private venture, was the intermediary agency partner for a majority of the early colleges in the state until April 2016, ensuring consistency in school development and fidelity to the design principles of NCNS, which include purposeful design, readiness for college, powerful teaching and learning, personalization, and redefined professionalism (NCDPI,

2015c). In 2015 in NC, the average graduation rate for early colleges was more than 95%, compared to the overall state average of 85.6%. In addition, 30 early college high schools had 100% graduation rate for the 2014-2015 school year (NCDPI, 2015b). For 2015-2016, early college high schools outperformed traditional high schools in the achievements of low income and minority students (NCDPI, 2016). From a social justice perspective, these programs are making a difference for students who have been marginalized in traditional schools. Thus, it is important to study who is leading these schools, how they lead in the unique context of their schools, and how they contribute to the success of their schools.

Overview of the Early College High School Concept

In 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation invested in and launched what became known as the Early College High School (ECHS) Initiative. Jobs for the Future (JFF) was tapped by the Gates Foundation to be the organization in charge of leading this national initiative to create innovative small high schools. Other organizations were recruited and received funding to be used to work at the local level with school districts and colleges to form partnerships that culminated in the creation of early college high schools (ECHSs). Working with several intermediary agencies over last decade, JFF helped to create or redesign more than 250 ECHSs in more than 30 states (JFF, n.d.).

After the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in December, 2015, which established a federal definition of ECHS programs, a renewed national interest in these innovative schools has developed. This is not surprising, given the success of ECHSs at improving graduation rates and helping students earn college credit in high school. While

the formal ECHS Initiative ended in 2014 and JFF no longer collects data to track and monitor partner schools and their students, the organization and many of the intermediary agencies continue to provide guidance and support to local school districts and colleges/universities for creating and sustaining ECHS programs (JFF, n.d.).

JFF and the intermediary agencies developed the Core Principles which were used to guide the design and implementation of ECHS programs (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). There is not a single design model for ECHSs. Each school is the result of a partnership between a local school district and an institution of higher education (IHE) partner, usually a community college or university. Each school that results from such a partnership is unique. However, there are several characteristics that are shared by most ECHSs, and which help to distinguish these programs from middle college high schools and small traditional high schools. The majority of ECHSs serve students in grades 9 through 12 or 13. Some programs have the additional fifth year to allow students the time, if needed, to complete degree requirements. Most ECHSs are located on the campus of the college or university partner. Each ECHS serves 400 or fewer students, and all students are expected to take and successfully complete college courses as a part of their coursework, beginning in ninth grade at some schools (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011).

Between 2002 and 2014, the ECHS Initiative invested more than \$100 million in the creation or redesign of more than 250 ECHS programs nationwide. Over the past 15 years, ECHSs have continued to serve the target population of students, including students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, low income students, and students who are the first in their families to attend college (Edmunds, 2012). The research

indicates that ECHSs have been successful in helping the students they serve graduate from high school and earn college credits or degrees (Berger et al., 2013). Additionally, ECHS students enroll in higher education after graduation at a higher rate than the national average for graduates from traditional high schools (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011).

ECHS Model

The ECHS model was based on a pre-existing early college high school and the middle college high school model pioneered by Janet Liberman (Liberman, 2004; Nodine, 2009; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Simon's Rock Early College was a small, private high school that served academically advanced students in grades 11 and 12, offering them college courses and the opportunity to earn a college degree. Unlike the ECHS model, this early predecessor targeted high achieving students who wanted to begin their college studies early. Most students graduated with an Associate's degree and pursued a four-year degree at another college or university. The school model with the most direct impact on the ECHS was the Middle College High School (MCHS) at LaGuardia Community College, which opened as an experimental public school in New York City in 1974. Unlike Simon's Rock Early College, MCHS served students at risk of not succeeding in the traditional school setting. MCHS exposed students to being on a college campus, but students were not required to take college courses in order to complete high school. Both of these schools were nontraditional in size, location, and in terms of giving high school students the opportunity to earn college credit (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

While the ECHS model advanced by the ECHS Initiative is similar to the MCHS model, there are important differences between the two innovative designs. In terms of similarities, both MCHSs and ECHSs are small; MCHS typically have no more than 450 students, and ECHSs are limited to 400 students total, with no more than 100 students per grade level (Lieberman, 2004; Nodine, 2009). All MCHSs are located on college campuses whereas 44% of ECHSs are located on college or university campuses, but all partner with an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Like contemporary MCHSs, ECHSs target student populations traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education, including students from minority backgrounds, students from low income families, students who are the first in their families to be college students, and students who are considered ‘at-risk’ in other ways (AIR/SRI, 2009; Edmunds, 2012; Webb & Mayka, 2011).

The primary differences between ECHSs and MCHSs is that ECHSs admit students directly from middle school into the ECHS program, while most MCHSs take students who have already completed a year or more of traditional high school. MCHSs make college courses available to students, but the academic focus is on high school courses, taught by high school teachers (Lieberman, 2004). ECHSs require students to enroll in college courses as soon as possible, and they work closely with the IHE partner to create an intentional academic structure that allows students to complete high school and earn a degree or two years of college credit in a compressed time frame by taking college courses for dual credit (Berger et al., 2013; Carter, 2012; Lieberman, 2004; Nodine, 2009). In order to help all students achieve success, ECHSs provide intentional

support to students, both academically and socially. Berger, Adelman, and Cole (2010) found that 84% of ECHSs offered a variety of support programs to students, and at least one adult monitored the academic and emotional needs of each student. According to Rosenbaum and Becker (2011), guidance counselors are not the only advisors to students in ECHSs. Teachers and administrators often have advising groups and assist with monitoring students' academic performance (Rosenbaum & Becker, 2011).

ECHS and MCHS programs are not the only contemporary models of small high schools. Since the 1960s, various types of small public schools have been developed, and many have experienced success. Between 2002 and 2007, the Gates Foundation and other philanthropic organizations provided funding to support a small innovative schools initiative, in addition to the ECHS Initiative (McQuillan, 2008). Small schools are either newly created individual programs or multiple programs on a single campus (sometimes referred to as smaller learning communities), resulting from the transformation of a large high school (Peters, 2011). New York, Chicago, Oakland, and Philadelphia, as well as other large urban school districts, have restructured many of their traditional schools based on the small schools model (Peters, 2011). Like the ECHS Initiative, the small schools movement sought to address conditions identified in comprehensive, traditional high schools as factors that impeded student success, including poor attendance, impersonalized learning environment, inadequate monitoring of students, and low expectations (Abdulkadiroglu, Hu, & Pathak, 2013; SERVE, n.d.).

Based on a number of defining characteristics, the ECHS model may be described as a subset of the small schools model. In other words, ECHSs are small schools, but not

all small schools are ECHSs. Both programs serve approximately 400 students, and focus on strong interpersonal relationships between students and teachers. ECHS programs and other small schools are often given greater autonomy over curriculum, calendar, pedagogy, and schedules than traditional high schools (Shakrani, 2008). Teachers in both ECHSs and other small schools are frequently involved in the decision-making processes for their schools, and take on more leadership roles. Like ECHSs, many small schools utilize advisory or mentoring programs as a means of supporting students (McQuillan, 2008). However, unlike ECHSs, other small high schools do not partner with colleges or universities to provide students with the opportunity to earn college credit while in high school (Nodine, 2009).

Problem Statement

Serving as principal of Rockingham Early College High School, I find it challenging to manage the many responsibilities of my unique position on a daily basis. I am the sole administrator in my school. Unlike most of our peers in traditional high schools, very few early college high school principals have an assistant principal, much less an administrative team. I am responsible for the administrative and managerial tasks associated with running a high school, for providing curriculum and instructional leadership for my teachers and students, as well as working directly with college administrators and staff as an advocate for the program and our students.

When I became principal of my school six years ago, I sought to learn as much as possible about serving in the unique setting of an early college high school. However, my efforts to research the role were not productive as I learned that there was a void in the

literature about the ECHS Initiative related to the principalship. While there is a growing body of research about the early college high school model, much of the work done so far focuses on the experience of students, teachers, or both, or it is empirical research reporting on the success of these unique high schools. The research related to the leadership of early college high schools is still very limited. Additionally, given the success of these innovative high schools, the time is right for a closer look at the principalship in the early college high school setting. After more than a decade of implementation across the nation, the early college high school is a successful model of high school reform based on student achievement, graduation rates, and helping traditionally underserved student groups access and succeed in higher education. My experiences as the principal of Rockingham Early College High School (RECHS) have convinced me that the early college high school (ECHS) model is positively impacting secondary education. Thus, the leaders of early college high schools need access to more information about how others in the same role handle the responsibilities of the position.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate how principals lead in the unique context of the early college high school.

Research Questions

1. How does the ECHS principal balance the mandates of the local school district and the higher education partner with the daily demands of leading a small, innovative high school?

2. Do ECHS principals perceive that their intentional use of specific leadership strategies or behaviors help to promote student success (as measured by graduation rate and School Performance Grade) at their schools?

In the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wizard is portrayed as the all-powerful leader of the Emerald City and the Land of Oz. He is respected and revered by the inhabitants of his land, as they are certain that he has the ability to see all, know all, and do all; hence, Dorothy is advised to seek the Wizard's counsel when she finds herself in the Land of Oz, wearing the magical ruby slippers, after her house falls on one of the wicked witches. The powerful Wizard, as it turns out, was a hoax, as is revealed when Toto pulls back the curtain to expose a man with a machine. "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain" uttered the would-be Wizard, after being exposed by the canine (Harmetz, 2013). Shortly after I became the principal of an early college high school, I found myself feeling much like the wizard, or rather, the man behind the curtain. As the sole administrator of my school, there are times when I feel that I am expected to be all-knowing all-powerful, and all things to all people, yet I constantly fall short of accomplishing the myriad tasks on my to-do lists.

At times, I have been overwhelmed in a way I never experienced in my work as an administrator at traditional schools. For example, in the ECHS setting, every student must successfully complete college courses in order to graduate. Thus, there is a sense of urgency to get ALL students college ready while they are still in high school. This is very different from the traditional high school hegemony that accepts the notion that some students will not be as successful as others. The ECHS Initiative rejects the tendency to

have lower expectations for certain groups of students, regardless of their previous academic record (Peters, 2011). In order to survive, I have had to revisit how I see myself and my work, and it has significantly impacted how I lead my school.

While it is true that there were times when I was not able to accomplish all that I set out to do as the principal of my former school, there are major differences in being the leader of a traditional school and being the sole leader of an early college high school program. In my leadership roles in traditional schools, I worked as part of an administrative team, and as a result, I was often able to delegate responsibilities and tasks to other administrators to accomplish the work in a timely manner. More importantly, I had peers, both in my school and across the district, with whom I could consult about challenges and obstacles. Traditional secondary schools tend to share numerous similarities, especially within a single school district, and this allows the leaders of traditional schools to rely on each other as a support network. This is not the case for principals in the early college high school setting. My peers are spread across the state and the nation. Even with the most advanced technology, peer networking is still a challenge, since the early college high school is a single program in many districts. As a result, principals like me often find we are even more isolated than our peers in traditional high schools.

As the principal of an early college high school, I am expected to fulfill the role of the principal based on the requirements of the school district the same as my colleagues in the traditional high schools, with the exception of the athletics program, and I am held to the same expectations as those of a traditional high school leader. In addition, I have

other unique duties and responsibilities because my school is located on the community college campus and because all of my students take college courses taught by college instructors. I am tasked with educating the public about the early college concept and with dispelling the misconception that the reason our high school students are able to earn college credit and complete degree requirements while still in high school is because our student body is comprised entirely of academically gifted and talented students. Because we must recruit our students from across the entire district, I have the responsibility of promoting the program to prospective students, parents, and to the community. I work with the administration of the college, and until April 2016, with the intermediary organization, North Carolina New Schools (NCNS), to facilitate the continued development of our program as a NCNS Partner school.

My school serves less than half the number of students served by the traditional schools in our district, so we do things on a smaller scale in the early college high school setting, but with the size of my staff, it is still a challenge. Prom? Yes, we do that; Yearbook? Yes, that too. Clubs? Sure. Testing and all accountability measures? Yes, absolutely. Guidance department? No, only one counselor. Support personnel, such as social worker, psychologist, and nurse? Yes, on a consultative basis, and all are shared with other schools in the district. Like the lion, the tin man, and the scarecrow in Oz, I seek courage, heart, and wisdom every day as I work to be the leader I need to be for my school. It is a daunting task. Even on a small scale, the role of a high school administrator is challenging and the extra duties and responsibilities of the early college high school only add to the complexity and magnitude of the challenge.

The Early College High School Initiative: History

To understand the context of my research, it is important to examine the history of the Early College High School (ECHS) Initiative. This section briefly describes the background of the initiative and as well as some of the underlying concepts and principles that form the basis of the ECHS design. Launched in 2002 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the ECHS Initiative originated as one part of the Foundation's reform effort to reinvent the nation's high schools. The Foundation used the ECHS Initiative to fund and promote the development of Early College High Schools (ECHSs). The Foundation's goal for ECHSs was to give students traditionally underrepresented in higher education the opportunity to earn a two-year degree or the equivalent in transferrable college credits while in high school, at no cost to the student (AIR/SRI, 2006). Tom Vander Ark, the Foundation's education director at the time, along with Tony Wagner from Harvard, articulated the vision of the initiative: "Even those students most at risk of school failure can perform at very high levels, given the right conditions: much smaller schools, teacher teamwork, a personalized learning environment, and many more opportunities for applied and hands-on learning" (Wagner & Vander Ark, 2001, n.p.). Between 2002 and 2004, The Gates Foundation, along with the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Woodruff Foundation invested more than \$124 million in support to the initiative, funding the creation of over 40 high schools in 19 states (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2004). Additional funding in 2004 allowed for the expansion of the ECHS Initiative so that by 2010, the intermediary agencies had opened more than 200 ECHSs.

Over the last 15 years, JFF and the intermediary agencies selected to implement the initiative have pioneered what has become a national effort to revolutionize public high schools. Currently, there are more than 280 schools serving more than 80,000 students in 32 states (JFF, n.d.). It is important to note that all current early college high schools are not the result of the formal ECHS Initiative. After the opening of the first ECHS Initiative programs, other ECHSs were started by school districts and other groups that were not part of the ECHS Initiative partnership network (Haxton et al., 2016). Most of the research analyzed for this study was conducted on schools that were ECHS Initiative partner schools.

Jobs for the Future (JFF), a national nonprofit organization with a focus on education, was designated by the Gates Foundation as the national coordinator of the ECHS Initiative and the network of intermediary agencies that worked to establish partner ECHSs. The original seven intermediary agencies that helped launch the first ECHSs in 2002-2003 were Antioch University Seattle (later known as the Center for Native Education), KnowledgeWorks Foundation (KWF), Middle College National Consortium (MCNC), National Council of La Raza (NCLR), SECME (formerly known as the Southeastern Consortium for Minorities in Education), the Utah Partnership for Education and Economic Development (UP), and Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (WWNFF). In 2003, three additional intermediary agencies were added to the ECHS Initiative network, including the City University of New York (CUNY), the Foundation for California Community Colleges (FCCC), and Gateway to College, Portland Community College (PCC). By 2005, there were a total of 13 intermediary

organizations, with the addition of North Carolina New Schools Project (NCNSP; later NC New Schools, NCNS), the University of Georgia System (UGS), and Texas High School Project (THSP; later Educate Texas) (AIR/SRI, 2005; AIR/SRI, 2006).

The ECHS Initiative gave each intermediary agency and associated schools flexibility, so that there is not a single definitive model for ECHSs. Local partners have control in the design of each individual school (Edmunds, 2012). For example, there are four basic designs for the delivery of college courses to students in ECHSs: students take college courses on the high school campus, taught by high school teachers; students take college classes on the college campus taught by high school teachers; students take college classes on the high school campus taught by college instructors; or students take college classes on the college campus taught by college instructors (AIR/SRI, 2007). Likewise, the makeup of the college class varies from school to school and grade to grade. Berger and associates (2013) reported that more than 50% of ECHSs enroll ninth-grade students in one or more college classes, but these classes are made up of only ECHS students. As students matriculate through school, they take more college courses, either as a part of a cohort of ECHS students in a class with other college students, or fully integrated into college classes with other college students. The study indicated that it is not unusual for dual credit and regular college courses to make up 100% of a student's schedule by the senior year (Berger et al., 2013). ECHS partners also have flexibility in determining whether or not the school will be a four- or five-year program, based on such variables as when the students begin taking college courses and the anticipated time needed to prepare students to pass placement tests required for many

college courses (AIR/SRI, 2007; Berger et al., 2010). Regardless of the specific structure of the school, all ECHSs are purposefully designed to eliminate the gap between high school and higher education; ECHS students are high school students and college students simultaneously (Berger et al., 2010).

After the first ECHSs opened in 2002, the initiative grew quickly nationwide. The first AIR/SRI report identified 22 ECHSs open in 12 states by the fall of 2003, serving students primarily from minority and/or low-income backgrounds, one of the core principles of the ECHS Initiative (2005). By the fall of 2004, the number of ECHSs increased to 49 schools nationwide, and one year later, there were 77 ECHSs (AIR/SRI, 2006, 2007). Five years into the initiative, there were 130 ECHSs open across 23 states, and by 2009, the total number of schools nationwide reached 157. Most schools had reached the point that they were enrolling students in all grades planned for the school (AIR/SRI, 2008, 2009). Berger and associates (2013) reported that more than 240 ECHSs were opened by intermediary organizations by 2012.

One distinguishing characteristic of ECHSs is the expectation that students will earn college credits while in high school. This concept is not unique to the ECHS model, as there are many models of dual credit programs. However, the ECHS Initiative expectation that ALL students will become college ready, have access to college courses, and accumulate college credits while in high school is unique. To facilitate achieving this goal, the ECHS model required a partnership between an Institution of Higher Education (IHE) and a local school district or other entity legally authorized to operate a school. In the 2005 evaluation report, 16 of the 22 IHEs were two-year colleges (AIR/SRI). Similar

findings were reported in subsequent years as well. Sixty-four percent of the IHEs were two-year institutions in 2007, as were 65% in 2008 (AIR/SRI, 2008, 2009). Webb and Gerwin (2014) reported that 44% of ECHSs were located on the campus of their IHE partner in 2013, and almost 75% were partnered with two-year colleges.

As a requirement of the partnership with the IHEs, ECHS students are expected to be enrolled in college classes and to earn a degree or two years of transferrable college credit. The AIR/SRI International evaluation reports found this to be true in most ECHSs. By 2006-2007, approximately 90% of the ECHSs enrolled some of their students in college courses, 52% of ECHS students took at least one college course, and the average ECHS graduate earned 23 college credits (AIR/SRI, 2008; AIR/SRI, 2009). Webb and Mayka (2011) found that 24% of the graduates earned a degree or two years of college credit, and 44% earned at least one year of college credit by the time they graduated from high school. Other researchers reported similar findings. In one study, 25% of ECHS graduates earned a degree or other college credential by the time they graduated high school, and over 80% earned some college credit; in another study, 30% of ECHS graduates earned a degree or other college credential by the time they graduated high school, and 94% earned some college credit (Berger et al., 2013; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). ECHS students not only enrolled and succeeded in college classes while in high school, but a high percentage also enrolled in postsecondary education after they graduated from ECHS. One study found that 86% of the ECHS graduates enrolled in college in the fall after graduation, with over 60% enrolling in four-year institutions (Webb & Mayka, 2011). In a randomized controlled trial of students from 10 ECHSs and a control group of

students from traditional high schools, Berger and associates (2013) found that 88% of ECHS graduates enrolled in college within six years of entering ninth grade, compared to 71% for the control group.

The ECHS experience has had a favorable impact on student outcomes, specifically attendance, graduation rate, and student achievement on state assessments. In all three of these areas, the findings from research affirm that the impact is positive. Beginning in 2004-2005, the attendance rate at ECHSs has been impressive, and higher than the rate at traditional schools. In the 2007 AIR/SRI evaluation report, the average daily attendance rate (ADA) for ECHS students was 91% in 2004-2005, and 79% of students missed five days or fewer. That rate improved to 94% by 2005-2006, and remained constant for 2006-2007 (AIR/SRI, 2006, 2007). Most recently, the ADA rate for 2012-2013 was 95% for ECHSs, compared to 92% for high schools nationally (Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

Studies also confirm that the graduation rate at ECHSs is high, and on average higher than the rate for traditional schools in the same districts or for the nation. In a study of 2008 ECHS graduates from 22 ECHSs using SIS data, Nodine (2009) found that the ECHS graduation rate was 92%, significantly higher than the 72% rate of all high schools nationally in the same year. In a study that retrospectively reviewed data for three consecutive years, the graduation rate for ECHS students was 86%, compared to 81% for students in the comparison group (Berger et al., 2013; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). A longitudinal randomized experimental study conducted by researchers from the SERVE Center in North Carolina showed that ninth graders who attend ECHSs are more likely to

graduate from high school and enroll in college than the students in the comparison group who did not attend ECHSs (Edmunds, Bernstein, Unlu, Glennie, & Willse, 2012; Edmunds, Willse, Arshavsky, & Dallas, 2013).

Prior to graduating, ECHS students also outperform other high school students on state high school assessments. According to the findings of the AIR/SRI annual evaluation report (2007) for 2005-2006, 81% of ECHS students achieved at a proficient level on state high school assessments in English Language Arts (ELA) while 66% achieved at that level on assessments in math. In 2007-2008, ECHS students achieved approximately 7 percentage points higher than the students in other schools in the same districts. ECHS students had an average proficiency rate of 74 for English Language Arts (ELA) and 67 for math (AIR/SRI, 2009). The available data for the 2008 and 2009 evaluation reports only allowed for school-to-school level comparison, rather than a student level comparison. However, similar findings were reported from other experimental studies that compared student level data. The multi-year impact study conducted by Berger et al. (2013) found that students who attended ECHSs performed significantly higher than students in the comparison group on ELA assessments, but there was no significant difference reported for math assessments. In a longitudinal study in North Carolina, Edmunds et al. (2012) found that a greater percentage of ECHS students took and passed college prep courses in math, science, and social studies than did students in the comparison group.

While the formal ECHS Initiative ended in 2014, the interest in these innovative schools continues. Last year, six new ECHS programs opened in North Carolina. The

success of ECHSs and the positive impact the ECHS experience has on students' educational outcomes are inspiring and suggests that more research on ECHS programs and the leaders of these schools is warranted.

Overview of Subsequent Chapters

Chapter II

In Chapter II, I will review the background literature for this study and share relevant research about the Early College High School Initiative. The first section examines the ECHS concept and an overview of the research about the initiative in general, as well as the ECHS Initiative in North Carolina, one of the states with the largest concentration of ECHS programs. The second section of Chapter II presents research related to effective principals and their leadership, with a subsection on leadership in small schools.

Chapter III

The qualitative design of this multi-site case study will be explained in chapter III. I have used a multi-site case study design in order to include myself as researcher and as a participant. I also provide relevant details about site selection, participant background, and data collection and analysis. Additionally, I address my subjectivity and my efforts to maintain the trustworthiness of the study since I am a participant as well as the researcher.

Chapter IV

The data collected through interviews with the ten study participants are presented in Chapter IV. I provide a thick, rich description of the leadership practices of each

principal included in the study, based on my analysis of the data. This includes detailed background about the participants and their schools based on interview data, as well as data from document analysis. There is a summary describing each principal's leadership as perceived by the principal and his/her colleague. These summaries include excerpts from interview transcripts. There is also a section that explores the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data.

Chapter V

The final chapter in this study summarizes the findings as they relate to each of the research questions. The chapter also includes my insights and interpretation of the data analysis, and discusses the implications of the study and my recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It's time to re-engineer our secondary schools.

—Marlene Seltzer

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership of early college high schools, specifically how individual principals lead these innovative schools. The intent was to examine how the principal perceives his or her own leadership practices, and how his or her colleagues perceive the principal's practices, skills, and leadership qualities. This review of the literature synthesizes the relevant research on the Early College High School Initiative and includes sections on the early college high school concept, an overview of the research on ECHS, and the ECHS Initiative in North Carolina. The second section examines research on effective principals and their leadership practices, including a subsection on the leadership of small schools.

The Early College Concept

Early College High Schools (ECHSs) across the nation are demonstrating that students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, those who are from low income families, and students who may be 'at risk' of dropping out of school because of social or emotional issues are capable of not only graduating high school, but also earning college degrees (Haxton et al., 2016; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Within the past few years, the

ECHSI has drawn attention from local, state, and even national policy makers. In his State of the Union Address, President Obama mentioned one ECHS and commented on the need for more schools based on the model,

Now at schools like P-Tech [ECHS] in Brooklyn, a collaboration between New York Public Schools and City University of New York and IBM, students will graduate with a high school diploma and an associate's degree in computers or engineering. We need to give every American student opportunities like this (2013).

ECHSs were further endorsed by President Obama and the United States Congress in the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. The ESSA established a federal definition for early college high schools, and allows states and local school districts to use ECHSs as a strategy for improving schools, particularly those serving students from minority and low-income backgrounds (Jobs for the Future [JFF], 2015). Even more recently, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos commended the nation's community colleges for the partnerships that are vital to the success of ECHSs, noting that these institutions are

helping high school students earn college credit and degrees through approaches that are accessible, faster and more affordable than ever. Early college programs are a great example of a unique role played by community colleges. This visionary model allows students, starting as early as ninth grade, to take high school and college courses, and to graduate in five years with a no-cost associate's degree. (DeVos, 2017, paras. 14–15).

Offering college courses to high school students is not unusual. In 2010-2011, 82% of public high schools offered dual credit college courses to students, and 52% of

postsecondary institutions reported offering courses to high school students (Haxton et al., 2016). What sets the Early College High School model apart is the target student population, and the conceptual framework for the initiative (Haxton et al., 2016; Webb & Gerwin, 2014). In describing the Early College High School (ECHS) model to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, Bill Gates (2007) remarked,

Early College High Schools are perhaps the most innovative and groundbreaking initiative underway nationally and show all of us what we can do if we think differently. The early college model is counter-intuitive to most, at least initially. The approach is to recruit traditionally low-performing, struggling students to attend high schools that require enrollment in college courses. The schools provide the corresponding support and guidance for students to graduate with two years of college credit and/or an associate's degree. (Gates, 2007, "Improving America's High Schools," para. 17)

Over the past 10 years the research has indicated the success of these innovative schools in blending secondary and postsecondary education so that more students not only graduate high school but enroll in and complete college (Webb & Gerwin, 2014). Given the success of the ECHSI and the growing national attention to ECHSs, it is important to take a closer look at the ECHSI concept and the practical design of the ECHS model.

The conceptual framework for the ECHSI is based on the Core Principles outlined by the Gates Foundation, and developed by JFF and the intermediaries.

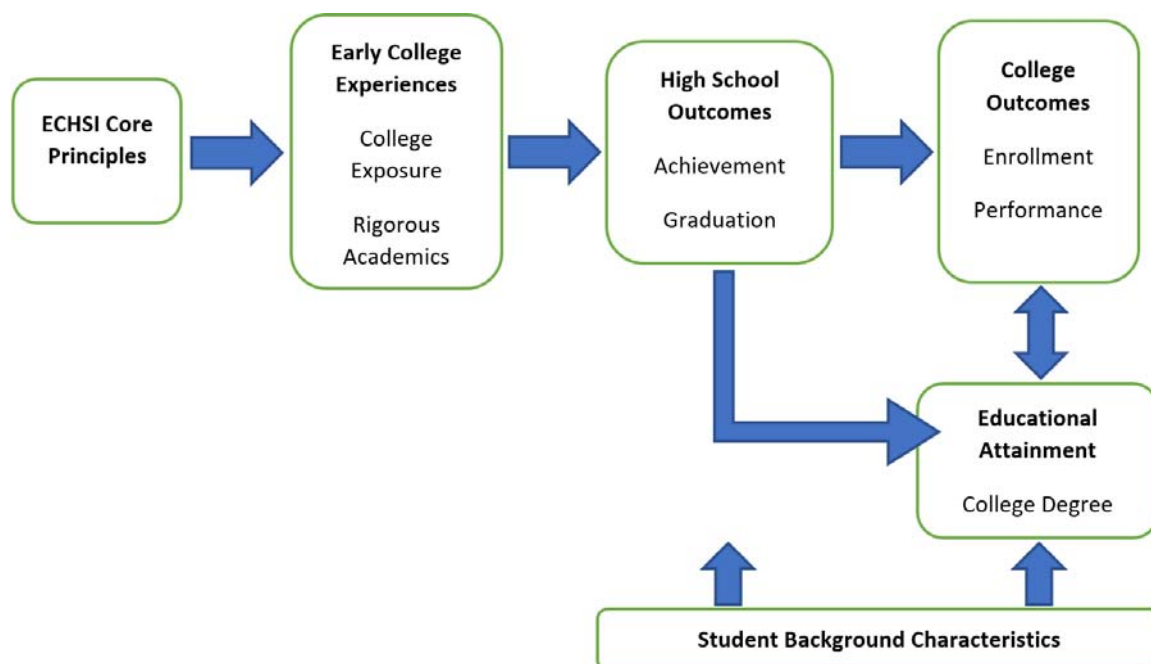


Figure 1. ECHSI Conceptual Framework. Source: Haxton et al. (2016), p. 411.

The original Core Principles developed in 2003 were:

- ECHSs serve students from populations typically underrepresented in postsecondary institutions.
- Students earn an associate's degree or 2 years of college credit toward the baccalaureate while in high school.
- The years to a postsecondary degree are compressed.
- The middle grades are included or there is outreach to middle-grade students to promote academic preparation and awareness of the ECHS.
- The ECHSs demonstrate the attributes of highly effective high schools. (AIR/SRI, 2007, p. 11).

In 2008, the original Core Principles were revised by JFF and the intermediary agencies to reflect the experience and wisdom gained during the early years of the initiative regarding how best to implement the vision of the ECHSI and to build sustainable schools. The revised Core Principles are:

- Early college schools are committed to serving students underrepresented in higher education.
- Early college schools are created and sustained by a local education agency, a higher education institution, and the community, all of whom are jointly accountable for student success.
- Early college schools and their higher education partners and community jointly develop an integrated academic program so all students earn 1 to 2 years of transferable college credit leading to college completion.
- Early college schools engage all students in a comprehensive support system that develops academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.
- Early college schools and their higher education and community partners work with intermediaries to create conditions and advocate for supportive policies that advance the early college movement. (AIR/SRI, 2009, p. 4).

Additionally, the ECHSs created as a part of the ECHS Initiative are expected to embrace what the Gates Foundation defined as “the new 3R’s—rigorous instruction, a relevant curriculum, and meaningful relationships” (AIR/SRI, 2006, p. 2). The focus of the ECHS Initiative is on students who are first generation college, minority students, English language learners, or students at risk of dropping out of school; those young people for whom “society often has low expectations for academic achievement” (JFF, n.d.). The premise underlying the initiative is that disengaged and underachieving high school students can be motivated to see themselves as successful college students given the appropriate circumstances (AIR/SRI, 2009).

The Early College High School Initiative: An Overview of the Research

The Early College High School (ECHS) Initiative is a high school reform movement that has influenced public education across the nation for more than a decade. Since the start of the initiative in 2002, a significant body of research has emerged, primarily about the early college concept, the implementation process, the increase in the

number of Early College High Schools (ECHSs) nationwide, student and teacher perceptions of the early college experience, and the success of these innovative schools. Much of the early research about the ECHS Initiative was descriptive and supportive of the concept. According to Miller et al. (2013), this is typical of education reform movements:

Innovations in education, in their early years, typically produce a rich literature on how the reform model works. Visionaries discuss the rationale for the innovation and elaborate their design principles. Advocates make strong arguments for the model to build public support. As a result, educational innovations are typically surrounded by an appreciative literature that energizes the growth and development of the model. (p. 674)

Although a wealth of research on the nationwide initiative and its innovative schools has been published, the leadership of these programs has seldom been addressed in the existing literature.

American Institutes for Research (AIR) in partnership with SRI International have made a significant contribution to the research on the ECHS Initiative and ECHSs. A 2004 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported Jobs for the Future's (JFF) creation of a Student Information System (SIS) that allowed JFF to collect and track student data and information about best practices from partner ECHSs (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2004). JFF used the SIS to warehouse and maintain data that demonstrated the efficacy of the model and supported the ECHSs in their continuous improvement efforts (JFF, n.d.). Data from the SIS has since been used in multiple studies (AIR & SRI 2007, 2008, 2009; Berger et al., 2013; Haxton et al., 2016; Webb & Mayka, 2011). With funding from the Gates Foundation, teams from AIR and SRI

International used a mixed methods approach to study qualitative and quantitative data for a national evaluation regarding the progress and implementation of ECHSI programs, and published a series of descriptive and evaluation annual reports and a six-year impact report (JFF, n.d.). Data for the evaluative reports were collected from the SIS, and through visits to ECHSs, interviews with students and others at schools, interviews with the intermediary agencies and representatives from the IHE partners, and through school level surveys (AIR & SRI, 2005; Shear et al., 2008). While initially descriptive and evaluative by design, after 2007 the reports also looked at student data from the SIS and compared the overall progress of ECHS students to students in traditional high schools in the same districts, using school level data (AIR/SRI ,2007; AIR/SRI, 2008; AIR/SRI, 2009). The focus of the AIR/SRI International evaluation study shifted in 2010 to examine the impact of the ECHS experience on student outcomes, specifically graduation rate, college course accumulation, and college degree completion. Building on the data collected for the AIR/SRI evaluation studies, Berger and associates used the SIS analytics to conduct a random-assignment study, *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (2013), which compare the outcomes for students who attended ECHSs with students who did not (Berger et al., 2013; Berger, Turk-Bicakci, Garet, Knudson, & Hoshen, 2014).

Another large body of literature about the ECHS Initiative has been published by Jobs for the Future (JFF), the national coordinating agency for the initiative. As the organization leading the effort, much of the literature published by JFF has been descriptive, dedicated to evaluating the implementation process for building and

sustaining ECHSs, and highlighting the success of individual schools, district and state level programs, and the students who attend ECHSs. Another area of focus for JFF study has been analyzing the local, state, and federal policies that promote or hinder the ECHS concept and the development of successful ECHS programs and making recommendations to school district administrators, state level education policy makers, as well as national leaders about best practices for establishing and sustaining ECHSs (JFF, n.d.; Webb & Gerwin, 2014).

The recent body of research on the ECHS model and the impact of the ECHS experience on student outcomes is growing. In a study that examined student performance data on North Carolina End of Course tests and ACT results for all students in the testing program, Kaniuka (2017) found that students who attend ECHSs performed better on end of course tests and the ACT than their peers in traditional high schools. In addition, the study also found that ECHS students demonstrated greater college readiness, as indicated by their overall performance on the ACT, than students in traditional high schools. Most significantly, ECHS students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds did significantly better on the ACT than students from the same background who did not attend ECHSs (Kaniuka, 2017). The findings from Kaniuka's study, which examined four years of test data from multiple school districts, and included a large sample size of students support similar findings from previous smaller studies by Edmunds (2010), Berger, Adleman, and Cole (2010), Hall (2013), and Haxton et al. (2016) which reported similar positive effects of attending ECHS on student performance on state assessments and graduation.

There has also been a significant contribution to the literature related to ECHSs in the form of doctoral dissertation studies, including several that pertain to the leaders of ECHS programs. A qualitative study of students attending five ECHS programs in Texas by Cravey (2013) found that ECHSs have a unique culture that promotes student success:

These schools, and the unique students that make up the student body, are creating a culture of social justice, democracy, acceptance, respect, and empowerment. Students are developing critical thinking abilities, a sense of self-responsibility and self-empowerment, combined with a desire to accept and assist others. Such abilities could readily lead to changing the face of the next generation of leaders. Key elements of social justice identified in this emerging school culture were those of relationships, diversity, a learning community, responsibility, and democracy. Additional cultural traits of the ECHS community identified through this research included commonality in overcoming struggles to succeed, a safe environment, and a culture of academic excellence as the norm. (p. 702)

In addition to the social justice elements of the ECHS culture identified by Cravey's research, Hammonds's (2015) research at several ECHSs in North Carolina found that the principals demonstrated social justice leadership when they worked to provide access for students from all backgrounds to the program, regardless of previous academic performance. In addition, Hammonds noted that ECHS principals must work to be socially just leaders who seek to change programs that disadvantage students from minority and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds, such as no tolerance discipline policies that she encountered at one school.

Several studies have been conducted that examined the ECHS concept from the community college perspective. Fowler-Cooper (2016) examined the collaborative relationship between community college presidents and ECHS principals in several

school districts in Texas. The findings from that study indicate that the leaders of ECHS programs must work together to establish effective communication networks, to develop opportunities for collaboration across the organization, and to regularly revisit and revise the memorandum of understanding that guides the partnership so that it meets the changing needs of the ECHS program. This study also noted that it is imperative for the leaders of ECHS programs to work to promote a clear and deep understanding of the factors that motivate the development of a ECHS partnership, the expected outcomes and goals of the partnership for all stakeholders, and the potential benefits of the partnership to all stakeholders (Fowler-Cooper, 2016). Similarly, Carter (2012) found that effective collaboration between community college leaders and ECHS principals, which fosters success in ECHS programs, “occurs through meaningful connections with open communication, trust, mutual respect, commitment, accountability, and professional knowledge and competence” (p. 246).

In a study of ECHS safety procedures, Reid (2015) also cited the importance of effective and frequent communication between the community college administration and ECHS leaders as essential for the safety and well-being of ECHS students and staff. Since colleges and high schools are not required to follow the same safety and security procedures, this study also indicated that it is important for administrators to work collaboratively to identify discrepancies that might exist between the college policies and procedures and the safety regulations, policies, and procedures with which the high school is expected to comply (Reid, 2015).

There is a growing body of research about the ECHS Initiative and the concept in general. In their review of the literature, Miller et al. (2013) noted that the ECHS Initiative is well documented with regard to reporting on the progress of the implementation and outcomes, and describing the early college design. This review also noted the evaluative studies previously discussed in this chapter as important to the body of empirical research on the initiative (Miller et al., 2013). However, the authors suggested that there is a need for continued research, “Given the limited knowledge base, there is more room for researchers to explore a broad range of questions about the early college initiative and synthesize insights into the experiences of students, teachers, and partner institutions” (Miller et al., 2013, p. 665). As part of a larger qualitative study, Hammonds conducted a synthesis of the research related to early college high schools and found that while there was a significant body of work, studies specifically related to the role of the principal in ECHSs were few (Hammonds, 2015).

Early College High Schools in North Carolina

In 2003, North Carolina New Schools Project (later known as North Carolina New Schools; NCNS) opened as the intermediary agency that facilitated the ECHS Initiative across the state (NCECHS Initiative) in the creation of new ECHS programs as well as the redesign of existing high schools. NCNS received public funding from school districts, community colleges and universities partners as well as private funding from many foundations and organizations across the nation (Vargas, 2010). In 2010, North Carolina led the nation with 70 ECHSs, and a report to the state’s General Assembly noted,

North Carolina's Early College High School Initiative represents the nation's most ambitious effort to implement an innovative educational approach intended to achieve the twin goals of improved outcomes for students and a better-trained workforce for the state's economy. (NCDPI, 2011, p. 1)

A majority of the state's 83 ECHSs were created as new schools between 2005 and 2016 in partnership with NCNS. A growing number of ECHSs have opened across the nation and in North Carolina that are not partnered with ECHS Initiative intermediaries (Edmunds, 2012; Haxton et al., 2016). This study focused on ECHSs in North Carolina that were partnered with NCNS and were formally included in the NCECHS Initiatives, a part of the national ECHS Initiative.

North Carolina's first 13 ECHSs opened in 2004. Working in conjunction with the NCDPI, NCNS expanded the initiative rapidly, opening 33 schools by the fall of 2007 (Miller et al., 2013). The NCECHS Initiative was unique in that it was one of two state programs affiliated with the Gates Foundation and the ECHS Initiative that were not fully funded by the initiative. From the beginning, the NCECHS Initiative also received financial support from then Governor Mike Easley's *Learn and Earn* initiative, and later from the state's *Cooperative Innovative High Schools* initiative. In 2011, the North Carolina General Assembly passed the *College and Career Promise* (CCP) legislation, and beginning in 2012, all existing innovative high school programs, including all ECHSs, were consolidated as part of the CCP (Coltrane & Eads, 2016).

One challenge faced by NCNS in the expansion of the NCECHS Initiative across the state in many different school districts was maintaining consistency in the implementation process. To ensure fidelity as the model was replicated, NCNS provided

technical assistance to local partners during the planning stages for each school, as well as professional development and instructional coaching for teachers and staff (Vargas & Miller, 2011). NCNS also developed a specific set of Design Principles, based on the ECHSI's Core Principles, that served to unify North Carolina's ECHSs but allowed for each school to be individually designed to meet the needs of the local partnership and the students the school served (Edmunds et al., 2016). The NCNS Design Principles were:

- a high degree of personalization,
- a strong focus on college-readiness,
- rigorous and relevant instruction,
- a culture of professionalism and collaboration among teachers,
- strong leadership, and
- purposeful design of school policies and structures that support and promote all the design elements (NCDPI, 2015c; Vargas & Miller, 2011).

In addition to the Design Principles, which provided a guide for planning, implementing, and sustaining ECHS programs, NCNS utilized JFF's Common Instructional Framework (CIF), which enabled ECHSs to create challenging academic programs with high expectations for all students and to provide the support needed to enable students from diverse backgrounds with varying ability levels to achieve success (JFF, 2013; NCDPI, 2015c).

North Carolina became a national model for the ECHS Initiative in regards to the support given to the initiative by local partners, the Department of Public Instruction, and the State Board of Education. In a 2010 brief prepared for JFF, *Policies Paved the Way*:

Early College Innovation in North Carolina, Vargas studied successful ECHSs across the state, interviewing school leaders, local administrators, and analyzing state policies and legislation related to the NCECHS Initiative. The findings reported in the brief noted that many leaders attributed the success of the NCECHS Initiative to waivers from state policies granted to individual ECHSs. For example, many ECHSs have a calendar waiver that allows the school to align the calendar with that of the partner IHE. This is important because 2006 legislation requires traditional k-12 public schools to start the school year no earlier than August 25 (Vargas, 2010). Another important waiver allows ECHSs flexibility in the required amount of time a student must spend in a course to receive credit. In addition to the ‘seat time’ waiver, ECHSs may also apply for a waiver that allows schools to alter the course sequences that must be followed by traditional high schools. A dual credit waiver permits ECHS students to take certain college courses in place of specific high school courses that are state graduation requirements. This waiver is critical in allowing ECHS students to accumulate credits towards a college degree while they are in high school. Combined, the various waiver options afford each ECHS the flexibility to design programs that promote student achievement (Vargas, 2010).

Over the past decade, multiple studies affirm that North Carolina’s ECHSs are among the most successful high schools in the state in preparing all students for success in college, work and life (Edmunds et al., 2012; NCDPI, 2015c; Vargas, 2010). As noted in a previous section of this chapter, researchers from SERVE, an independent research center in Greensboro, NC, conducted a longitudinal experimental study of ECHS students in 33 schools, the first study of this kind in the nation (Edmunds, 2010). The findings

showed that ECHSs had a positive impact on student outcomes, including school attendance, graduation rate, and college enrollment (Edmunds, 2010). In subsequent studies that examined data from this research, ECHS students were more likely to stay in school, and students who were behind academically after eighth grade were more likely to be ‘on track’ for college by the end of the tenth grade than the comparison students who did not attend ECHSs (Edmunds et al., 2012, 2013; NCNS, 2015). NCNS reported similar findings in *Changing the Future Through Early College High Schools* (2015), noting that 75% of ECHSs with graduating cohorts in 2013 had graduation rates of 95% or higher, with 25 schools achieving 100% graduation rates. The same report noted that 53% of the 2013 graduates also earned an Associate’s degree or two years of college credits (NCNS, 2015). Overall, findings from the research on the NCECHS Initiative is consistent with the findings from studies on the national initiative; ECHSs are succeeding as innovative schools and are meeting the needs of the students they serve (Edmunds et al., 2016).

Effective Principals

There has been much research done over the past three decades that indicates that principal leadership is a factor in student achievement, second only to the effect of the classroom teacher (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). As the call for reformed schools and increased accountability continues, the principal must focus more on instructional leadership—on improved teaching and learning--and less on management and administrative tasks and duties (Murphy et al., 2007). Effective secondary principals must

use time and other resources to address many managerial tasks while also attending to those responsibilities associated with instructional leadership, and they must accomplish a multitude of tasks on a daily basis. It is important for acting and aspiring school leaders to consider how school principals allocate their time and attention between what they perceive to be tasks and responsibilities associated with instructional leadership and those they perceive to be associated with managerial-administrative leadership (Portin, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman, Russell, Samuelson & Yeh, 2009). In schools where student achievement is a central focus and there is a continuous effort to improve learning and teaching, principals are intentional about how they utilize time and prioritize duties (Reitzug et al., 2008; Sanzo, Sherman, & Clayton, 2011).

Coelli and Green (2012) found that principals impact both graduation rate and student achievement on standardized tests. In their quantitative study using data collected by school districts for 10 years, they found that the principal's impact on graduation rate increases over time, and it may take three years or longer on the job before a principal reaches his/her full impact on student outcomes in a school (Coelli & Green, 2012). Branch and colleagues (2013) found that effective principals positively impact student achievement by as much as two to seven months of learning in one school year.

While it is clear that an effective principal is essential for improving student achievement, the research also suggests that traditional leadership practices are no longer effective. In a hearing before the United States Senate committee on health, education, labor and pensions, Dr. Tony Habit, the founder and then president of North Carolina

New Schools (NCNS), advised the legislators that new cooperative, innovative school programs like the ECHS model necessitate a new type of leader:

[A] new generation of student-focused schools calls for a new model for school leadership. The principal in a traditional high school is a building manager first and an educator second. Schools which place teaching and learning above all else are led by principals who understand both school design and who facilitate among teachers an unrelenting focus on high quality teaching and learning. One element of our partnerships aimed at ensuring the sustainability of innovation is our expectation that our partner schools are completely autonomous, with its own principal and school budget, an essential step to create more entrepreneurial faculties with both the responsibility and accountability for the success of all students. This increases the demand for capable leaders. New, proactive initiatives to identify, recruit, place and support principals to lead schools are required. Leadership preparation programs should emphasize both school designs that support achievement and the role of principals as facilitators of adult learning in schools intended to strengthen teaching. (Habit, 2007, pp. 7–8)

There are specific types of leadership, as well as certain leadership practices that have been identified as exemplars of high performing, successful schools. Principals who are focused on improving their schools should be attentive to this type of leadership and the associated practices. According to Murphy et al. (2007),

An assortment of researchers over the last three decades has helped us see that not all leadership is equal, that a particular type of leadership is especially visible in high performing schools and school districts. This type of leadership can best be labeled ‘leadership for learning’, ‘instructionally focused leadership’ or ‘leadership for school improvement.’ The touchstones for this type of leadership include the ability of leaders (a) to stay consistently focused on the right stuff/the core technology of schooling, or learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment and (b) to make all the other dimensions of schooling (e.g. administration, organization, finance) work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning. (p. 179)

The research regarding school principals as instructional leaders identifies certain leadership characteristics which have a positive impact on student achievement (Hallinger, 2005; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Leithwood, 2005; O'Donnell & White, 2005). According to Crum and Sherman (2008), these characteristics can be categorized as “developing personnel and facilitating leadership, responsible delegation and empowering the team, recognizing ultimate accountability, communicating and rapport, facilitating instruction, and managing change” (p. 567). Other characteristics of instructional leadership that have been associated with school improvement include coaching teachers, directly teaching students, using data to inform instruction, evaluating the instructional program, creating a positive climate, promoting a supportive work environment, and leading professional development for teachers (Hallinger, 2005; Horng et al., 2010).

In a synthesis of more than a decade of research, the Wallace Foundation (2013) identified five key practices that are performed by effective school leaders:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students;
- Creating a climate hospitable to education;
- Cultivating leadership in others;
- Improving instruction; and
- Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement (p. 4).

Effective principals promote high standards and emphasize rigorous learning goals. They also clearly articulate these standards and goals in the vision and mission they promote to the school community. The same report noted that the traditional role of the principal as

the school manager is outdated in the era of standards based reform and greater accountability (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

The Wallace Foundation’s findings reinforced the findings of other researchers. In “Leadership for Learning: Lessons from 40 Years of Empirical Research,” Hallinger (2011) ascertained that there are specific leadership practices that contribute to student learning and school improvement, and identified “four specific dimensions of leading for learning . . . values and beliefs, leadership focus, contexts for leadership, and sharing leadership” (p. 125). Hallinger synthesized these areas in a visual model of leadership that is included in Figure 2.

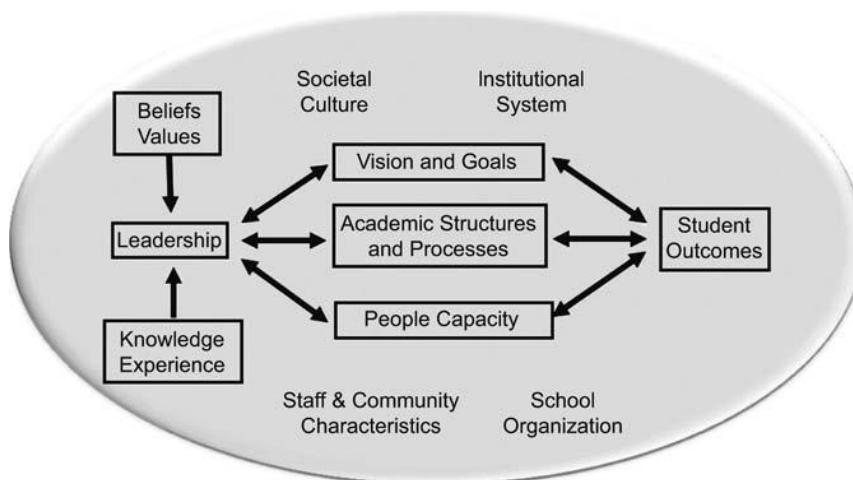


Figure 2. Leadership for Learning Model. Source: Hallinger (2011), p. 127.

This meta-analysis of previous research also noted that leadership is influenced by, and also influences, the values system of the school. The way in which principals lead is likewise influenced by his/her background including education, personal experiences, and prior work as an administrator or teacher (Hallinger, 2011). The school context also

plays a key role in the principal's leadership practice, since each school setting is unique, and what works in one school is not always generalizable to other sites. Hallinger's findings support the notion that leadership for school improvement must be tailored to the context of the individual school, rejecting 'one size fits all' policies and programs often prescribed by school districts (2011).

According to Hallinger (2011), effective principals utilize the area of 'vision and goals' to inspire others to give their effort towards the collective goals of the school. Likewise, they use vision to motivate others. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) found that school leaders who are able to articulate a clear vision and goals is essential for school improvement. They noted that the principal's success at positively impacting student achievement only happens through cooperation with teachers and others.

Principals who work collaboratively with others in the school to improve the school's academic capacity demonstrate leadership in the domain of 'academic structures and processes' that positively impact student achievement (Hallinger, 2011). This area includes practices such as principals promoting and participating with teachers in professional development activities, as well as the strategic allocation of resources, including time for teaching and learning (Robinson et al., 2008).

Heck and Hallinger (2009) found that principals who implement shared decision-making practices positively impacted their schools' academic capacity and student growth. Sun and Leithwood's (2012) findings also noted a positive correlation between principal's implementation of distributed leadership practices and student achievement. These findings support the notion that leadership is not the sole domain of one individual

with a specific title, but rather is found throughout a school or organization. Hallinger (2011) noted that it is important for principals to build leadership capacity in others and to strategically share leadership opportunities across the school.

Louis, Leithwood, Walstrom, and Anderson (2010) also found that effective principals shared leadership with teachers, and they encouraged teachers to work collaboratively. This improved teachers' relationships with one another and was also shown to positively impact student achievement. The same study reported that principals who are concerned with growth in student achievement as well as teacher professional growth spend time in classrooms and provide teachers with feedback about what is working and what is not (Louis et al., 2010).

Small School Leadership

The small schools movement of the early 2000s was another high school reform initiative aimed at reinventing the nation's traditional high school model in order to address problems such as high dropout rates, low student achievement, and negative school cultures (Peters, 2011). Newly created small school programs and traditional schools restructured into multiple small school programs or smaller learning communities (SLCs) in urban areas such as Chicago and New York had a positive impact on student attendance, graduation rate, and achievement (Peters, 2011; Shah, Mediratta, & McAlister, 2009). The ECHS fits the small schools model in significant ways, but unlike other small schools, the ECHS partnerships with colleges or universities make the ECHS unique. Nevertheless, there are similarities between leading the ECHS and leading in

other small school settings. Thus, it is important to review the research on leadership in the small school setting.

While there is very limited research related to leading in small schools, and much of that is dated, it is important to consider leading in the unique context of a small educational program such as the ECHS. Just as the leadership practices of contemporary, collaborative, innovative schools should be noticeably different from the leadership practices used by traditional, authoritarian principals, the leadership needed for small schools, such as ECHS programs, is also different from the leadership required for larger, comprehensive, traditional high schools. Principals in small schools, especially small high schools, must be willing to take on a number of non-traditional roles that are not typically the domain of the high school principal (Peters, 2011). As Peters (2011) shared, “Leadership is an important factor in the success of any school. The challenge of leadership is no less intense for leaders of small school reform. In fact, leaders of small schools may find their roles even more varied than those of a traditional principal” (p. 92).

A review of the literature related to small school reform efforts by Goodwin and Page (2000) noted that principals who lead the startup of a new smaller learning community or new school or the conversion of a traditional school into one or more SLC programs may experience obstacles if the school district is reluctant about granting the autonomy necessary for successful implementation of a unique school model. Peters’s (2011) later review of the literature noted that principals of small schools must be instructional leaders who are also able to market their school; they must work to create

and maintain partnerships with stakeholders and the community; they must be effective communicators who articulate a clear vision for the school, all while remaining faithful to the small schools paradigm.

Others have also contributed to the knowledge base related to leading in the small school setting. In 2004, Copland and Boatright cautioned that simply making large schools smaller would not resolve the issues plaguing public education. Their article noted that there was a solid research base that affirmed the benefits of small schools, especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Copland & Boatright, 2004). Based on the review of numerous existing studies, they identified eight best practices that leaders of small schools should consider, including:

- Focus on a clear learning agenda with a few specific goals, and work to ensure that all students reach the goals;
- Take advantage of the unique opportunity to know every student personally, and to be known by the students in the school;
- Practice socially just leadership and promote equity for all;
- Share power, authority, and decision making with others throughout the school;
- Promote a culture of inquiry, using data to make informed decisions in the best interests of students;
- Approach problems as opportunities to learn and grow as a school;
- Create and nurture a professional learning community;

- Build deep connections with families and the school community (Copland & Boatright, 2004).

Despite well-documented positive outcomes on student learning for students in small schools, researchers caution that size only is not sufficient to achieve the desired results. “It is clear that attention only to changes in size and structure will be insufficient for achieving excellent results for all students. . . . A host of other concerns merits attention to ensure that new small high schools aren’t simply miniature versions of their former selves” (Copland & Boatright, 2004, p. 767).

Social Justice Theory

As our public schools become more and more diverse, the principals who lead them must move away from the traditional, managerial style of leadership that has historically been associated with school administrators. Leaders for contemporary schools, especially small schools such as ECHS programs that serve students from traditionally marginalized background groups, must be change agents and advocates for their schools and their students. Based on the review of the literature regarding the ECHS Initiative and the students these schools seek to serve, ECHS leaders should strive to promote social justice education in their work.

Berkovich (2014) explained that the influence of social justice theory in education is evident in schools where class, gender, sexual orientation, disability and other conditions used to marginalize individuals are a central focus for dialogue and there is effort to change the hegemony that has marginalized individuals in the past. Because the early college initiative is focused on improving access to higher education for

traditionally marginalized students, the movement is strongly influenced by social justice theory (Miller et al., 2013). In a study involving students at five ECHS programs in Texas, Cravey (2013) identified elements of social justice embedded in the culture of the schools, including “relationships, diversity, a learning community, responsibility, and democracy” (p. 702). The ECHS programs created structures that lead to a more democratic environment, where students are not inhibited or forced to conform, but rather are encouraged to grow intellectually, socially, and culturally (Cravey, 2013).

Pounder, Reitzug, and Young (2002) noted that social justice is relevant to education when the goal of educators is “the absolute equal right of all individuals to live in and participate in a society that they help to shape and that also meets their needs” (p. 271). They also described leadership for social justice as inclusive, with a focus on teaching and learning, an emphasis on supporting students, and a collaborative, whole school effort to meet the needs of each student (Pounder et al., 2002). In a review of the literature on social justice education, Hytten and Bettez (2011) noted that a just school promotes equity and inclusion, has high expectations for all students, emphasizes relationships, utilizes a school-wide approach, and explicitly incorporates social justice education and interventions.

Berkovich (2014) explained that social justice leaders must possess a thorough understanding of social justice and how it impacts schools, they must have an understanding that schools can both support and negate social justice, and they must be capable of interrupting processes that detract from social justice while promoting those processes that support it.

In “Disrupting Injustice: Principals Narrate the Strategies They Use to Improve Their Schools and Advance Social Justice,” Theoharis (2010) studied principals identified as social justice leaders and found that they were intentional about disrupting injustices in their schools in order to promote social justice. The principals he studied work to change structures that marginalized or segregated students, such as pull out programs. They worked intentionally with their teachers and staff to build a socially just school. The study found that these principals trusted and respected teachers, and did not attempt to micromanage their teaching practices. Likewise, the principals worked to “build staff capacity and investment in their social justice aims, and they were adamant about empowering and respecting their staff members” (Theoharis, 2010, p. 354). Principals who work to create more socially just schools must be courageous, willing to advocate for their students and their schools, and willing to challenge the status quo (Berkovich, 2014)

Summary

In summary, this chapter has examined the existing literature relevant to the ECHS Initiative. Since the early 2000s, the number of ECHS programs nationally has increased rapidly, and North Carolina leads the movement with more than 80 ECHSs across the state. While there is a significant and growing body of research related to the ECHS concept, the model of such programs, the implementation process, the partnerships necessary for success, student and teacher experiences in these non-traditional schools, the ECHS principalship has not been widely studied. The chapter also included a brief description of literature related to the effective principal, and the unique context of

leading in a small school setting. Finally, a brief discussion of leading for socially just schooling was included, as it is my belief that the ECHS concept is inherently influenced by the notion of social justice because of the target populations we seek to serve. As a result, I believe the leaders of ECHS programs should intentionally identify, discuss, and work to address social justice issues in their schools and the school community.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.

—John Quincy Adams

Qualitative Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of principals who are currently leading early college high schools. The following sections describe the methodological design including participants, data collection and analysis, subjectivity, trustworthiness, risks, benefits and significance of this study.

To achieve a detailed account of the leadership practices of early college high school principals, a qualitative approach was utilized. According to Lichtman (2010), the purpose of qualitative research is to “provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience” (p. 12). A multi-site case study approach was chosen to examine the praxis of leaders in ECHS programs where the graduation rate is high and students also achieve at high levels as evidenced by the school’s annual performance grade. A multi-site case study design allowed me to investigate the cases from a holistic perspective (Yin, 2014).

Another reason a multi-site case study was used for this research is that it allowed me to be a participant as well as the researcher. As discussed previously, my motivation

to do this work has been fueled by my desire to learn how to be a more effective leader for my students and my school. Since the research on ECHS leadership is limited, I was motivated to learn from my peers as often as possible. Over the years, I have come to feel that the ECHS principalship is a unique sub-culture of school leadership. In addition, I believe that reflecting on my work and sharing my own experiences in dialogue with others also helps me to grow as a professional. Thus, there was a reflexive, autobiographical component to the data collection, analysis of the data, and the discussion of the findings for this study. As an experienced ECHS principal, including myself in the study allowed me to engage in natural conversations with other research participants around our work experiences as a form of data collection. My own knowledge and experiences contributed to the flow of the interviews and enabled me to construct more analytical probing questions during the interviews. I believe this enhanced the quality and depth of the information that I collected from others and provided rich, descriptive data as the basis of this study. As a result, I engaged in self-reflection as well as the critical analysis of my own data.

Research Participants

I used purposive sampling to identify participants for my research (Creswell, 2014). The participants were early college high school principals and their colleagues who worked in NCNS partner schools and who led schools where the 2015 graduation rate was 95% or higher, and whose school's annual School Performance Grade (SPG) in 2014-2015 was A. Previous research has suggested that principal leadership impacts both the graduation rate and student achievement, but that the impact of a leader may take up

to three years to be evident (Coelli & Green, 2012). Subsequently, the principal sample group for my study was limited to principals who served in their current school for at least two years prior to 2015-2016 school year. The NCDPI (2015b) State, District, and School Summary annual report on school performance indicators for 2014-2015 was used to identify schools whose performance satisfied the criteria specified above and summarized in Table 1. After filtering for schools that met these criteria, I identified the ECHS programs in the list, and determined which were NCNS partners based on the *2014-2015 Report to the NC General Assembly: Evaluation of Innovative High School Programs* (NCDPI, 2015c). In 2015, North Carolina had 77 early college high schools, more than any other state. However, once I applied my selection criteria, the process narrowed it to 41 possible school sites for inclusion in the study. Because of travel distance and time limitations, I excluded those schools that were more than three hours driving distance from my home. Because I have worked most closely with the ECHS programs in two counties closest to my own school district, I also excluded those sites. This left 32 schools on the list of possible sites (including my school).

Based on this list of ECHS programs partnered with NCNS that met the other selection criteria, I visited the school websites to find email addresses to initiate contact with the principals to determine their years of experience at the school and to inquire about their preliminary interest in participating in the study if they had served in the school for at least two years prior to 2015-2016. I emailed 31 principals initially. Of those, six responded to my email. One principal who responded was new to her school in 2015-2016, and was not eligible to participate. The other five principals met all the

criteria to participate, so I sent them the invitation to participate via email (Appendix A), and asked for the name and contact information of a colleague to invite to participate from his/her school. I also asked for the name and contact information for the district administrator who would approve my request to do research in the school district. All five principals responded positively to my invitation to participate, and provided the requested information.

Table 1

Selection Criteria for Cases

Criteria	Rationale
Graduation rate of 95% or greater and SPG of A	To examine the leadership of principals in schools where the graduation rate exceeded the state average and where student achievement is high based on indicators included in SPG
Principal serving at the ECHS for at least 2 years prior to 2015-2016	Principal impact on graduation rate and student achievement may take up to 3 years to be evident
School partnered with NCNS	Partner schools are expected to embrace design principles and to implement common instructional framework and principals participate in professional development that might impact practices
School location accessible to researcher	Because of time and travel constraints, schools within 3-hour travel time were identified
School not located in two adjoining counties	Researcher already familiar with the leaders in these districts

My rationale for including a colleague of each principal in this study was to have at least one additional perspective on the principal's leadership. I have participated in several leadership assessments and know from experience that those whom we work with often have perceptions about our leadership practice that are very different from our own self-perceptions. In addition, having a second perspective added to the triangulation process. I asked each principal to self-select the colleague because it was important to me that this person know the principal's leadership well, and as an outside visitor/researcher, I could not easily determine the colleague best positioned to know the principal's leadership well. I acknowledge that asking the principals to determine which of their colleagues participated limited the study to the extent that the principals most likely chose individuals with whom they have a close, positive working relationship, which may have biased some of the information that they shared to portray the principal in a positive light. However, I feel the additional perspective of the colleague regarding the principal's leadership added to the depth of information I collected, and outweighed the possible disadvantages of any bias that may have occurred. I emailed the colleague identified by each principal, and included the invitation to participate (see Appendix A). All colleagues agreed to take part in the study.

With the prospective principals and colleagues for participation identified, I emailed the district administrator, and included the IRB approval information for my study as well as the formal request to do research in the school district as attachments (Appendix B). Three of the district administrators responded quickly and provided a letter granting me permission to do research with the principal and colleague identified in

the school district. The fourth district required me to complete an approval process, which included a lengthy application, and I had to wait several weeks before my request was ultimately approved. I also sent a request to conduct research to the director of accountability in my own school district, and was given permission to include myself and my colleague in the study. The final result of this process was that five different school sites were selected for inclusion in the study, with the principal and one colleague from each school as participants (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	School	Role
Patricia Everett	Northeast ECHS	principal
Olivia Martin	Northeast ECHS	colleague
Brian Thorpe	Eastern ECHS	principal
Pam Kincaid	Eastern ECHS	colleague
Heather Dalton	Central ECHS	principal
Harold Kennedy	Central ECHS	colleague
Frank Vernon	Southern ECHS	principal
Barbara York	Southern ECHS	colleague
Carol Foust	Western ECHS	principal
Mary Daniel	Western ECHS	colleague

Data Collection

This multi-site qualitative case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews to collect data from early college high school principals and their colleagues about the principals' work, especially tasks and responsibilities they perceive to

positively impacting student achievement and/or the graduation rate of their schools (for Initial Interview Guides, see Tables 3 and 4). The semi-structured interview format utilized questions that were written in advance, but also allowed for questions to be generated organically during the conversational interviews, which provided denser descriptive data. The principal and colleague interviews were conducted at the school sites. The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes to more than two hours, and the average length was 90 minutes. A colleague who does not work at my school conducted the interviews with me and my colleague. All interviews were audio-recorded, and later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. I sent each participant a transcribed copy of his/her interview, and asked him/her to check for accuracy and for his/her assistance in revisions. I heard back from three participants; two were satisfied with the transcript as it was sent, and a third sent notes for revisions. This was a part of the member-checking process used to ensure accuracy of the data collected for the study.

Table 3

Principal Interview Questions

Principal Interview Questions	Rationale
Share with me your experiences as an educator prior to becoming the principal of your current school.	Background information about the principal
How did you come to be an ECHS principal?	Background information
Tell me about your ECHS.	Background information about program
Tell me about your experience as an ECHS principal.	Background information; research questions 1 and 2

Table 3

Cont.

Principal Interview Questions	Rationale
<p>Please describe your relationships with others in your school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have an assistant principal or other administrative support? • What about student support services—how many make up your team, and how do you work with them? • Who is your administrative designee when you are not on campus? • Who is on your school Leadership Team, and how does that group function in your school? 	<p>Research questions 1 and 2 Descriptive details about program</p>
<p>What are some of your fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning? How do these beliefs impact your leadership?</p>	<p>Descriptive details about principal's leadership; research question 2</p>
<p>Describe a recent day in your work life from the beginning when you arrive at school until you leave to go home.</p>	<p>Research questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>What practices/skills/strategies do you use that impact student achievement and/or the graduation rate in your school?</p>	<p>Research question 2</p>
<p>What factors of your leadership contribute to the success of your school?</p>	<p>Research questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>What is the biggest obstacle to success for your school? For you as a leader?</p>	<p>Descriptive details; research questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>What makes you a successful leader?</p>	<p>Descriptive details; research questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>How do you schedule your time? How do you keep track of what you actually do each day versus what you planned/had scheduled for the day?</p>	<p>Descriptive details; research questions 1 and 2</p>

Table 3

Cont.

Principal Interview Questions	Rationale
How do you balance the responsibilities and demands of your school district with the demands placed upon you/your school by your higher education partner and/or NCNS?	Research Question 1
How does your current position compare to your previous work as a school principal? a. What are the similarities? b. What are the differences?	Descriptive details; Research Question 1 and 2
Describe your current leadership style and your philosophy of school leadership.	Descriptive details
Describe your support network in your current position. How does this compare to your previous leadership roles/previous support systems?	Descriptive details; Research Questions 1 and 2
Describe your partnership with NCNS.	Descriptive details
Describe your partnership with the college/university.	Descriptive details; research Question 1

Table 4

Colleague Interview Questions

Colleague Interview Questions	Rationale
Share with me your experiences as an educator prior to beginning your position at your current school	Background information about the colleague
How did you come to be at your current ECHS?	Background information
Tell me about your ECHS.	Background information about program
Describe your working relationship with your principal.	Background information; Research Questions 1 and 2

Table 4

Cont.

Colleague Interview Questions	Rationale
<p>Describe your principal's leadership style.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your principal delegate administrative duties? • What about student support services—how does the principal work with these individuals? • Who is administrative designee when the principal is not on campus? • Who is on your school's Leadership Team, and how does that group function? 	<p>Research Questions 1 and 2</p> <p>Descriptive details about program</p>
<p>What are some of your fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning? How does your principal support these beliefs?</p>	<p>Descriptive details about teaching and learning at ECHS; Research Question 2</p>
<p>Describe a typical day for you and your principal. What do your interactions look like on a typical day?</p>	<p>Research Questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>What practices/skills/strategies does your principal use that impact student achievement and/or the graduation rate in your school?</p>	<p>Research Question 2</p>
<p>How does the principal contribute to the success of your school?</p>	<p>Research Questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>What is the biggest obstacle to success for your school? How does the principal confront this obstacle?</p>	<p>Descriptive details; Research Questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>What makes your principal a successful leader?</p>	<p>Descriptive details; Research Questions 1 and 2</p>
<p>How does your principal manage time at school? Does he/she stay on track with what is planned for each day? How does he/she handle it when things don't go as planned?</p>	<p>Descriptive details; Research Questions 1 and 2</p>

Table 4

Cont.

Colleague Interview Questions	Rationale
How do your principal balance the responsibilities and demands of the school district with the demands placed upon your school by the higher education partner and/or NCNS?	Research Question 1
Describe your principal have a support network? If so, who is in the network?	Descriptive details; Research Question 1 and 2
Describe your school's partnership with NCNS.	Descriptive details
Describe your school's partnership with the college/university.	Descriptive details; Research Question 1

In addition to the data collected from the interviews, I reviewed and analyzed several documents related to the schools included in the study. I examined the NC School Report Card for 2015 and 2016 for each site, as well as information for each school that I located at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The information from analyzing the School Report Cards and the statistical information were used to correct data from the interview transcripts that the principals shared from memory and to provide supplemental descriptive information about the school. For example, the school report cards included the school performance grades, the size of the student body, and information about the number of teachers at the school, as well as school level testing data. From the NCES reports I determined the locale code setting for each school. I also reviewed the School Improvement Plan and/or the Impact Plan for 2015 for each school. The SIP/Impact Plan review was a means to confirm the composition of the SIP team at each school, and to compare the goals of the school to the descriptive details shared by

the principal and his/her colleague regarding the challenges/obstacles for the school, how the school is dealing with those challenges/obstacles, and also to glean information about possible strategies/practices being implemented in the school to ensure a high graduation rate and to support student achievement. Information from the analysis of these documents was part of the data triangulation process. I used a journal to record my own thoughts and ideas during the research process. Details from my journal and notes from observations during my visit to each school were used in the description of the school campus, buildings, and for other details about the setting. My journal also helped me keep track of tasks to be completed. Finally, the journal was used when I needed to jot down memories of my own work for later review and reflection. I used the transcripts from the other participants' interviews for autobiographical data collection as well. I reviewed the same documents from my school that I reviewed for the schools of the other participants.

Analysis of the Data

Initially after completing each set of interviews, I listened to the recordings during my commute to and from work. This allowed me to become familiar with the content of each interview before the transcription process was completed. By listening to each interview multiple times, I became aware of words and phrases used often by individual participants, as well as those used by multiple participants. While listening to the audio files, I used my cell phone to record notes/memos to myself that were also later transcribed as a part of my journaling process. The notes/memos were used along with

the notes I'd taken during the interviews to help me identify initial codes that I used to begin analysis of the transcription documents.

After the interviews were transcribed, I read them as I listened to the recordings again to make corrections and edit as needed. I used paper copies to begin the next step in the analysis process. I used different colored highlighters and ink to mark passages and code with words and phrases identified while listening to the audio files and during the initial reading of the transcripts. These initial codes were based on open coding after the preliminary review of the data, rather than identified in advance (Creswell, 2014). Twenty-one codes were identified, including: problems, NCNS, design principles, changes, collaboration, flexibility, self-perceptions, balance, people, students, trust, relationships, processes/structures, skills/practices/strategies, data, technology, monitoring, social justice, vision/mission, caring, and empowering.

The electronic files of the transcribed interviews were uploaded to Dedoose, a coding software program. Using this program, I created parent codes based on the mark ups previously done to each interview transcript. From the initial open codes, axial coding was used to identify six categories, which were: balance, relationships, collaboration, self-perceptions, processes/structures, and obstacles/problems. Finally, selective coding was used to identify three themes: student-centered focus, servant leadership, and obstacles and problems (the unicorn effect). Open, axial, and selective coding were used to group several codes into categories and the categories into themes (see Figure 3; Creswell, 2014; Lichtman 2010).

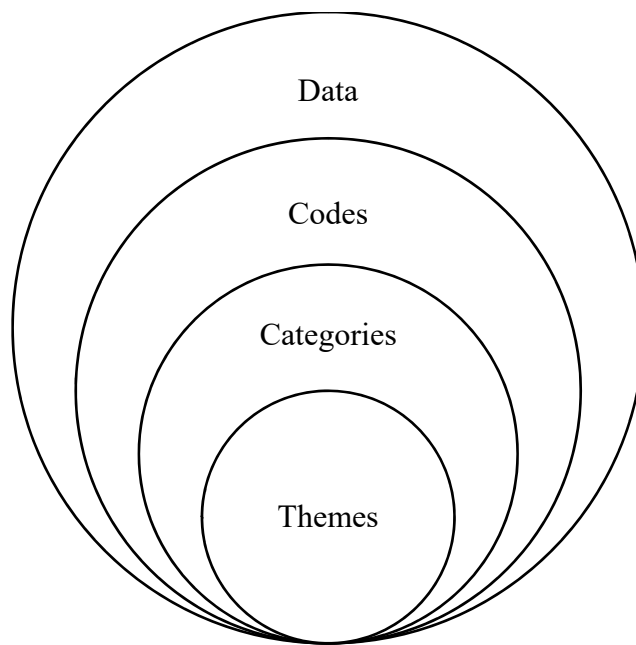


Figure 3. Data Analysis Concept Map. Adapted from Lichtman (2010).

In addition to assisting with the coding of the interview transcripts and other information, Dedoose allowed me to easily color code passages from each interview transcript that fit one or more codes to be used in the descriptive evidence presented in the findings and results chapters. Analyzing the data allowed me to identify relationships between data from various sources, to make connections between the data and my research questions, and to interpret and make meaning from the data.

Subjectivity

As principal of an early college high school (ECHS), this research allowed me to learn more about my work from myself and others who were in the same leadership position in other ECHSs. The research on the topic of ECHS leadership is limited, thus my peers and I have not been able to rely on the existing literature to inform us about how to improve our practice. When given the opportunity, we've engaged in

conversations about our work to learn from one another. Therefore, I was very interested in closely examining the work of other ECHS principals.

The qualitative design of this study and the autobiographical component required me to address my subjectivity as both the researcher and a participant. According to Lichtman (2010), “The qualitative researcher is aware of and sensitive to the way his or her own history shapes a study” (p. 122). Since I am currently a practicing early college high school principal, and my interest in doing the research for this study grew out of my desire to learn more about how others in the same role accomplish their professional responsibilities, I acknowledge that my personal subjectivity was present in all phases of my work. I was aware that my familiarity with the research setting and with the work of the other participants could have predisposed me to feel over confident about the data collected from the interviews and observations. Throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation I have worked to be reflective and cognizant of my own thoughts, feelings, and biases, while also understanding that as the researcher, my role is subjective (Lichtman, 2010).

As a part of the research and analysis process, I examined my thoughts and perceptions about my work as a ECHS principal, and about the ECHS concept in general. I am aware that my personal experiences over the course of my career have influenced not only how I describe my work, but how I understood others as they described their work in the context of early college high school leadership. As a first-generation college student, from a poor, single parent background, I see myself in many of my ECHS students. I am passionate about the work we do in the ECHS programs to help students

realize their full potential, often despite major obstacles and disadvantages. At the same time, I am often frustrated because our success as a school is quickly discounted by those who do not understand the ECHS concept or who are misinformed about the type of students who attend our schools. I knew from the beginning that my background, experiences, beliefs, and values would impact my work as the researcher in this study, which is one reason I decided to include myself as a participant as well. Like the other participants, I have worked intentionally and deliberately to improve my school so that all students succeed and achieve. It has not been an easy task. Because of my experiences, one assumption I had when I started this study was that it would identify a set of specific practices and strategies that ECHS principals are using to improve graduation rates and student achievement. I had to acknowledge this assumption and challenge myself as I conducted interviews and collected data. As I have gone through the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, I realized that my assumption was flawed, and there is not one set of practices and strategies, but rather that each leader utilizes what works in his/her school context to meet the needs of students. This was a strong reminder of the importance of reflexivity as a part of the research process.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the validity of my analysis and interpretation of the data, I employed member checking, peer review, triangulation, and rich, thick description (Creswell, 2013). Member checking, according to Creswell (2013) “involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 252). Each participant was sent the

transcription of his/her interview, and asked to provide feedback if he/she felt there was a need for revisions or corrections. I heard back from three participants about the initial transcript files; two were satisfied with the transcription and offered no feedback about revisions or edits, while a third provided specific feedback to correct several errors/omissions in the transcript. Each participant also received a draft copy of the findings and results chapters to review for accuracy of content as well. While I asked each participant to advise me that he/she received the files and to provide a response, I only received replies from two participants. Both acknowledged receipt of the files, but neither offered any specific feedback.

Another method I utilized to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis and presentation of the findings was peer review. A colleague who is familiar with the ECHS concept and a fellow graduate student served as my peer reviewers. They read drafts of the findings and results chapters, and I also discussed the analysis of the data with the colleague during the process. The feedback from my colleague was very helpful, as the advice she offered provided guidance that assisted me in determining where I needed to add more explanation in the findings and results chapters. For example, she suggested that I include basic details about each school in the beginning of the sections that describe each of the principals. I agreed that this short section with information about the school helped to establish the context for the principal's leadership. The graduate student who reviewed my drafts helped me with a project at my school in the past, and has continued to show an interest in learning about the ECHS concept. I asked if he would be willing to review the drafts of the findings and results. After reading over the chapters, he asked

some clarifying questions, but he did not offer specific suggestions for areas that might need additional details or further explanation. The feedback and questions helped me to ensure the findings and interpretations were consistent with the data collected.

Triangulation was achieved by using interviews with the principals as well as their colleagues. In addition, I analyzed documents from each school, including the school improvement plan, the NC School Report Card, and data from NCES about each school. This document analysis, as well as a review of each school's website, enabled me to verify facts and statistical data shared by the principals and/or their colleagues during the interview. In addition, I reviewed my own notes from each interview, as well as field notes that were taken on the visits to each school site as sources of data. Lichtman (2010) explains that triangulation involves using numerous, varied data sources to give validity to the research. Detailed, descriptive writing has been used in reporting about the analysis and interpretation of the data, the findings, as well as in other sections of the study. Writing that is detailed, specific, and thoroughly descriptive helped to ensure the validity of the entire study (Creswell, 2013).

Risks and Benefits

There were nominal risks to the participants in this study. There were no physical risks to participants. There is a minimal risk that a participant's identity might be revealed or his/her privacy compromised. In order to minimize these risks during the research process, I have worked to respect and protect the privacy of all participants as much as possible. As I coded, categorized, and analyzed data, I used pseudonyms for all participants and their schools. In addition, I did not give specific demographic

information about individual participants. Because there are so few ECHS programs in North Carolina, and there is only one principal in each school, I elected to present the autobiographical findings and results by writing in the third person as well. Likewise, I have not included specific details about events, programs, or other information that might reveal the identity of participants.

There are several potential benefits from this study. Most significantly, the study contributes to the literature about leading in the ECHS setting. Principals who participated in the study, including myself, had the opportunity to discuss our practice with a peer, and to reflect on the significance of our work and how we do our jobs on a day to day basis. There is also a possibility that one or more participants found that the process validated how he/she/they approach the work of the ECHS principalship. In addition, the findings from my research may be helpful to current and future ECHS principals as they work to improve their schools' graduation rate and student achievement outcomes.

Significance of this Research

There are more than 280 early college high schools across the United States. Currently, North Carolina has 83 early college high schools, more than any other state. Before 2001, there were no such programs in NC. The increase in the number of early college high schools in the last decade suggests that the initiative is not a temporary trend. However, the organization most involved with the ECHS initiative at the national level, Jobs for the Future, has very few resources or research publications that are

specifically related to leadership or designed for supporting the principals who are navigating the uncharted waters of this innovative concept.

In 2015, the average graduation rate for early colleges in NC was more than 95%, compared to the overall state average of 85.6%. In addition, 30 early college high schools had 100% graduation rate for the 2014-2015 school year (NCDPI, 2015a). For 2015-2016, early college high schools outperformed traditional high schools in the performance of low income and minority students (NCDPI, 2016). There is a need for more research on the early college high school concept, and specifically on the principals who lead these schools. As public high schools on college campuses, the early college high school presents unique challenges for leaders. The ECHS leader is a public school principal, accountable for the same responsibilities and duties as principals in traditional high schools. However, the principal at the early college high school is also required to work within the context of the college where the school is physically located. Thus, the principal is also accountable to the college administration and must work in conjunction with the leaders of the college to create a learning organization that joins both the high school and the college faculties in meeting the needs of all students. Even those of us with years of prior experience teaching and leading in traditional high schools find that we are not prepared for the unique challenges and unusual problems we face in our schools.

After more than a decade of implementation across the nation, the early college high school is a successful model of high school reform based on student achievement, graduation rates, and helping traditionally underserved student groups access and succeed

in higher education. Thus, it is important to study who is leading these schools, how they lead in the unique context of their schools, and how they contribute to the success of their schools.

For North Carolina's early college high schools to continue to improve in the areas of graduation rate, student academic achievement, and helping underserved student groups with access to college, it is important for these schools to have qualified and capable leaders. To be effective leaders, it will benefit current and future administrators of early college high schools to learn from those presently serving in the field.

CHAPTER IV

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple.

—Dr. Seuss

The purpose of this study was to explore how early college high school principals lead their schools by examining principal perceptions about his/her leadership practices as well as the perceptions of others about the principal's practices, skills, and leadership qualities. Participants were selected based on their school's graduation rate and School Performance Grade for 2015, as well as the number of years the principal has served at his/her school. Qualitative data for this study were collected through informal interviews with each principal and one colleague, observation notes taken during the visit to each school, and review of the school's website, School Improvement Plans for 2014-2015, and NC School Report Cards for 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. How does the ECHS principal balance the mandates of the local school district and the higher education partner with the daily demands of leading a small, innovative high school?
2. Do ECHS principals perceive that their intentional use of specific leadership strategies or behaviors help to promote student success (as measured by graduation rate and School Performance Grade) at their schools?

In the effort to protect each participant's identity, specific background and demographic data is presented in the first section of this chapter, but is not linked directly to a school or individual principal or colleague. Section two includes a brief introduction to each principal and information about his/her school, and includes an overview of the findings related to each principal's leadership. Section three employs a thematic approach to present and discuss the findings of the study related to each of the following themes that emerged from the analysis of the data: student-centered focus, servant leadership and the unicorn effect. The last section is a summary of the chapter.

Participant Background

Each of the five principals who participated in this study has experienced a unique journey as an educator which led him/her to his/her current position as the leader at an innovative high school. All participants were middle school and/or high school teachers at the beginning of their careers, with their experience in the classroom ranging from six to 20 years. All five principals served at least three years as an assistant principal in traditional schools. Two of the administrators had previous experience as a principal before moving to their current positions. The others had no prior experience as principal of a traditional school. Two participants opened their schools and have been there since the beginning. The other three participants were each preceded by the principal who opened their school. Three of the principals had previous experience in a least one other school district.

The semi-structured interview did not include questions about the participant's personal life, but four of the five principals talked about family during the interview--

three mentioned their children, four mentioned a spouse. Two of the principals also talked about their previous experiences as coaches of high school athletic teams during the interviews. Two principals also shared personal information regarding their own life and education backgrounds which they believed influenced their work as early college principals. Both related that being the first in their families to attend college enabled them to identify with many of their students and also fuels their passion for the early college concept. The only demographic information collected by the researcher was noting the gender and race of the principals in the study: three participants were female, two were male, and all were Caucasian.

Each principal who participated in the study was asked to self-select a colleague who knew his/her leadership well to participate in the study by being interviewed. Three principals selected a teacher as the colleague. One principal selected the school's guidance counselor, and one selected the school's dean of students. All the colleagues who participated in the study had worked in their schools for at least three years. Four of the colleagues were female; one was male. Three were Caucasian, and two were African American

Principals, Schools, and Leadership

Patricia Everett, Principal of Northeast Early College High School

Patricia Everett is the principal of Northeast Early College High School (NECHS). The school is located on a community college campus in a small-town setting. NECHS is in a school district classified as fringe rural (NCES). Total student enrollment in 2014-2015 was 221, and in 2015-2016 the total was 228. The school's graduation rate

was 100% in 2015 and 2016, and the School Performance Grade was A for both years (NC School Report Card). The school is a five-year program, serving students in grades nine through 13. In 2015-2016, the school had eight full-time teachers, a guidance counselor, one office staff person, one teacher assistant, and Everett. The student body was 60% female and 50% non-white minority. Approximately 44% of students qualified for free or reduced price meals in 2014-2015 (NCES).

Everett's previous experience includes time as a teacher, a building level administrator, and a central office administrator. She has worked in the same school district throughout her career. Everett's impeccable style and professional demeanor immediately conveyed a sense of confidence. She has a warm, sincere smile that welcomes students and staff, as well as visitors to her school. She speaks to each student as she makes her way down the hall towards her office. Students smile when they see her and return her greetings. Everett's office, where the interview took place, is modest in size and décor, situated just across the hall from a busy room used by students for studying and a place to gather when they are not in college classes. Everett, who describes herself as a 'detail person,' has notebooks of documents ready to discuss during our conversation.

Everett shared that since the first cohort of seniors graduated in 2013, her first year as principal at NECHS, the percentage of students who graduate with both a high school diploma and a degree has increased. She noted,

The school opened in 2008. We've had—this will be our fourth graduating class. It's our largest graduating class. Forty-two students will graduate, and right now, if all the students continue along the path and meet the requirements, 90% of the

students should graduate with an associate's degree as well. In years past we've hovered between 65% to 70% of the students graduating with a two-year degree.

As a new principal, Everett was concerned about the low graduation rate and that is something she has worked intentionally to improve over the last three years. She noted that she was surprised to discover seniors in their fifth year of high school who were far behind in the credits they needed to graduate:

It is the first graduating class, I had five students that I didn't think would even graduate with a high school diploma. And there's no reason why students should be in school for five years and only have—not even be close to the 28 credit hours they need. So there was a lot of clean up, and you can't wait, it's a lot of early intervention. You can't wait until the fourth and fifth year to try to make a change with these students.

Everett explained that she has worked with the guidance counselor and teachers since that first year to identify factors that hindered success for some students. She spoke with enthusiasm about the school wide intervention plan that is used to as a tool for monitoring student progress and to provide support to students as needed, noting that this has been a factor in getting to the 100% graduation rate that NECHS first achieved in 2015.

Everett also explained that she has established school-wide high expectations for all students that have positively impacted both student achievement and the graduation rate at NECHS. She shared that high expectations, which are clearly communicated to all, especially parents and incoming students, are key factors in the school's success:

The high expectations, and that's with discipline and academics. The parents are told upfront what's expected of them. At freshman orientation, I go through the

expectations. I go through the handbook with parents. I tell them that we are not going to accept late work. We do not accept excuses unless they had a valid note. Being upfront with parents, and telling them as soon as the kid is accepted, that helps tremendously, just so they know what to expect. And then follow through.

In addition to the high expectations for students, Everett has also established high expectation for teachers and staff at NECHS. She expects teachers to build strong, supportive relationships with students, and to work collaboratively to monitor student achievement. Everett emphasized the importance of relationship building, high expectations, and teachers working together to monitor students:

I believe that it's important for the teachers to build our relationships with the students. They have to do that. They have to be upfront with the students with expectations, and they have to follow through with the consequences, both academic and behavioral, and I expect my teachers to push the students and challenge them... the kids will rise to your expectations, but you can't lower those expectations...I expect my teachers to work together. I expect everyone to be a team player. And we are doing this through PLC meetings that they schedule with each other, some co-planning activities, cross-curricular units, but I expect all of my teachers to have high expectations, and to build a relationship with the students, because personalization is a big thing here.

Monitoring students is not left solely up to the teachers at NECHS. Everett and the guidance counselor, the only student support services staff member, along with the community college liaison, actively participate in the process. In fact, Everett noted that the schoolwide intervention plan that is now in place at her school is a key factor in getting all students to high levels of success. Everett shared that this monitoring process allows teachers to provide timely intervention and support to students who might be struggling academically or otherwise. She commented,

We have an intervention program. Any student that's failing a class, once report cards are sent out, we put their names on a spreadsheet that's shared with all of the teachers. I can quickly see students, without going into individual students in PowerSchool, and the teachers can see who's struggling. We have an intervention pyramid that we follow, and the teachers share what works, what happened. We document how many times the parents have been called, and it's like instead of just having one person and their eyes on it, all four teachers and the counselor and I, we're all trying to meet with these students, and if their name is put on the document, there are certain things that a teacher has to do in a classroom, and then I also meet with the students, and have administrative conferences with them.

Everett shared that she takes a personal interest in individual students, and this helps to ensure that students do not slip through the cracks. She described one encounter with a student, "I found out one kid was signed up to take the GED. He hadn't even withdrawn from my school yet. I pulled him in here and I said, "What are you doing with yourself?"

When asked about the practices and strategies that contribute most to student success and the high graduation rate at NECHS, Everett specifically identified high expectations, building relationships, and working collaboratively with staff to monitor students and personalize support and interventions as key factors that contribute to the success of NECHS. She summarized her perceptions by stating,

I think the main key to our success rate with our—with everything, I think it's just keeping your hands on the kids, always being involved, always knowing what they're doing. Communicating with teachers. Getting input from them. What's going on with your kids? Are you concerned about anybody? And we have these discussions.

Everett also shared that she, the guidance counselor, and the college liaison have required meetings with all seniors and their parents at the beginning of each year. In this manner,

they ensure that students and parents know what is required for students to graduate high school, earn their degree, and be prepared for whatever they plan to do after graduation.

Working with the community college and the school district to support improved teaching and learning is another way that Everett has worked to support students and staff at NECHS. During her tenure, the school has implemented a ‘bring your own device’ technology policy. Everett explained that all of her students do not own laptops, and this was a major concern. She explained that she negotiated with college administrators for permission to use an empty classroom, which she turned into a technology lab. Likewise, she noted that she “begged” the school district for a teacher assistant position, which was given to her school, and that person is now the online learning facilitator. In addition, Everett used funds from her school’s budget to purchase laptops that can be checked out by students who do not own their own device.

While she did not mention social justice leadership, the way Everett handled this situation reflects the influence of social justice. Everett’s main concern was providing access to the same opportunity and resources for all students, not just those who could afford to bring their own laptops to school. The way she advocated for her school and her students in securing the use of a room, a position for a facilitator, and using school funds to provide technology to those who did not own their own devices modeled leading for socially just schools.

In describing obstacles and problems that she confronts as the principal of NECHS, Everett noted that she sometimes has to negotiate with the school district about requirements. She explained that she sought special permission to submit the Impact

Plan, which was a requirement of NCNS as the School Improvement Plan (SIP) for her school. She noted that initially, her school was not allowed to do this, but when four other schools in the district partnered with NCNS for a different program and were required to submit Impact Plans to NCNS as well, the district allowed all five schools to submit the Impact Plans as their school's SIP. Another issue Everett shared was that she felt there is a lack of understanding about the ECHS concept at the district level. She explained that she did not feel supported by central office administration because there no one who really embraced the ECHS concept or knew how to assist her in leading the program.

When asked to describe NECHS, Patricia Everett's colleague, Olivia Martin, shared, "We target students who traditionally would not be college goers." Martin explained that she "loves the kids" at her school, and noted that she frequently hears comments such as, "oh, you must work with the smart kids," a common misconception about ECHS programs and the students who attend them. Martin described Everett as "amazing," commenting:

she is constantly reflecting and evaluating and looking for where we can improve, and that is one thing—she is always ready for a challenge. She is never just complacent because we are a high performing early college, and I think a lot of principals could look at that and say well, we're doing really well, we're just gonna stay where we are and I have never ever felt like Patricia is just satisfied with where we are. It is always what can we do differently and better.

Martin also noted that as a leader, Everett is deliberate about engaging the teachers and school staff in the decision-making process. Martin further shared that Everett's leadership makes her feel valued and trusted, which was not the case in a school where Martin previously worked:

She has always made me feel very appreciated and that's one thing that I think all teachers value . . . I feel like she trusts me in my classroom to make decisions about the way I teach my content. She's comes in often, which I appreciate. I know that might make some teachers nervous but I actually enjoy her coming in, she just kind of pops in and sees what the kids are doing and she'll ask them questions or I'll talk to her about what we're doing that day, and so I feel like she always has a really good idea of what's going on in my classroom and she'll ask me about it or ask the kids about it, even out in the hallway.

Martin cited daily interaction with the principal as a characteristic of NECHS that was not true when she worked in a traditional high school. "We kind of conference informally every morning," explained Martin.

When asked how Everett's leadership contributes to the success of the school, Martin noted that Everett takes on many duties herself, and that she is flexible in dealing with situations that arise:

I don't know how she does all the things she does to put everything in place . . . because she wears 15 hats, I mean she is the test coordinator, she's the principal, she dealing with discipline, she has to do busses, she's our instructional leader . . . she's always looking for new ways to make powerful, purposeful learning happen in our classroom and she's really good about bringing resources to us.

Martin described Everett as a problem solver, noting that Everett used school-owned computers to give students who did not have computers at home access to technology: "she is always looking at ways to make sure these kids are okay and they have things that might be hard for them to have."

According to Martin, Everett embraces innovative teaching strategies and student-centered approaches to instruction. "She gives me a lot of flexibility, she definitely encourages project based learning." Martin also shared that Everett is visionary, setting

the tone for the school. “She has high expectations, and because of this, teachers are able to maintain high expectations and our students rise to meet those.” Martin also described Everett as a caring leader, who communicates that she cares to students and teachers alike, noting, “she conferences with students a lot; almost in the way that a guidance counselor would.” Martin went on to share that she feels the students respect Everett because they know she has their best interests in mind.

Martin also shared that Everett focuses on data for making decisions, specifically about support for students who might be struggling, sharing, “She is a huge believer in looking at data and using that to inform decision making . . . putting supports in place, like our intervention pyramid . . . we look at who is not doing well and what can we do to support those students.” When students struggle, Martin said that Everett is proactive in contacting students and their parents, meeting with them about concerns and to explain options.

Brian Thorpe, Principal of Eastern Early College High School

Brian Thorpe, principal at Eastern Early College High School (EECHS) is charismatic and outgoing, and always eager to talk about his school. He carries on an easy banter with students as he leads visitors through the hallways. Thorpe’s sense of pride for his students, staff, and the school is obvious to those who converse with him about EECHS.

EECHS is situated in a school district with a small city locale code as assigned by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). In 2014-2015, the total student enrollment for EECHS was 200, and by 2015-2016, the student population increased to

214. EECHS achieved a graduation rate of 97.5% in 2015, and improved to 100% in 2016. The School Performance Grade was A in 2015, but declined to a B in 2016. The school exceed expected growth in 2015, and met expected growth in 2016 (NC School Report Card). EECHS is a five-year program, with students in high school grades nine through 13. The student body was 55% female in 2015, and 40% non-white minority. 34% of EECHS students were eligible for free or reduced price school meals in 2014-2015 (NCES).

Thorpe elaborated about what he expects to see when he visits classrooms, as well as what he wants for students in general, stating,

When I go into a classroom, I want to hear good noise . . . Relevancy is very important. I want to get kids really thinking, interacting with each other, working in teams with the goal of building some soft skills, too . . . just treating other people like the way you want to be treated. I want them to be safe. That's number one. But what I want to see for the students is a lot of engagement. I want to see them writing, I want to see them problem solving. Just a lot of different activities. I don't like a static environment . . . Education is power. It gives you options and choices in life and I think that's—a teacher needs to be the leader in the classroom.

In addition to a high level of student engagement, Thorpe explained that EECHS has a focus on technology, with a school wide digital transformation plan as a central factor. The emphasis on technology is due in part to Thorpe's own continuous learning, the result of a professional development activity in which he had participated, bringing back what he learned, and sharing with his teachers. The results, according to Thorpe, were positive changes for the school:

I think one of the things we do really well, if you walk to any of our classrooms, you'll see blended learning going on. We're a one-to-one, 24-7 school. Our students have access to technology, and very innovative, very open to allowing teachers to take risks and treat them as professionals.

Thorpe referenced his coaching background as an influence on his approach to leading the school. He described his ability at "putting people in the right seat" as one of his strengths, which he attributes to his years as a coach. Thorpe also mentioned New England Patriots Coach Belichick when he explained his philosophy of school leadership. Thorpe shared,

I mean leadership is about influence and I think you have to get the work done through people, not in a manipulative way, but you can't get it done all by yourself. That's where you know people's strengths. It's just like in sports. I think about Belichick and the Patriots, he gets everybody involved, no matter who's on the field, he's got a system in place that works for his personnel and they know what's expected. I mean it's a professional organization, they're very successful. And if you're a part of the decision-making and you feel like you're touching the ball, you're going to be more motivated...leadership is motivation. You need to get people to run into a brick wall for you.

Thorpe added that, as a part of empowering his staff, he sees himself as the "professional development coordinator" for the school, noting that he expects teachers to learn, and gives them "voice and choice" in professional development topics and focus at the school level, in addition to those mandated by the district.

Building relationships is another strength that Thorpe attributes, at least in part, to his coaching background. He noted that he and the staff at EECHS value relationships, and that there is a feeling of family at the school, commenting,

I think we're diverse and we respect each other, we're a family. We really push that family concept. It's not always perfect, but I think our kids feel very comfortable with each other no matter if they're—no matter what their—the background is . . . Relationships are important, I've got very strong relationships with the kids now. I feel like it's back to where it used to be . . . when I was coaching.

Thorpe emphasized relationships with parents and the community, as well as those with students and staff. He commented that he meets regularly with parents whenever there is a concern about a student: “if a student has more than one F, if they aren't going to class, I have a lot of meetings.”

In addition to relationships, Thorpe emphasized communication as a key factor in leadership that positively impacts school success. He explained that he is good at two-way communication and described himself as an effective listener. He noted that maintaining open channels of communication between the college instructors and the high school and between the district and the high school is imperative. He also mentioned communicating with teachers as something he enjoyed: “I really love talking to teachers, the post-ops, and picking their brain.”

When asked to describe himself as a leader, Thorpe shared that he strives to be a servant leader, adding, “you have to be able to lead yourself before you can lead people.” Thorpe noted that he works to be collaborative, and he welcomes feedback from teachers and others, and to include others in the decision-making processes for the school.

When asked about obstacles and problems that challenge his school, Thorpe commented, “A lot of people don't understand the model.” As a result, Thorpe felt that he is often an advocate for his school and the ECHS concept. He explained that his ability to

relate to people helps him to be effective in that role. Thorpe also shared that working with the college faculty and staff on issues regarding high school students' behavior and discipline issues while in other areas of the college campus was sometimes a challenge. Thorpe described an incident where he was notified of two high school students who were in another building on campus and were involved in a serious discipline incident. Thorpe investigated, found the incident indeed took place, with college personnel nearby who had no idea anything had happened. Thorpe indicated that he spent an entire day dealing with this incident, which had serious implications for the high school students involved, but which the college administration and staff did not take as seriously. The discrepancies between the rules and regulations that govern high school students and those that govern students in higher education have the potential to create problems for ECHS administrators like Thorpe.

Pam Kincaid, one of Brian Thorpe's colleagues, described EECHS as a unique program, commenting, "it's definitely an opportunity for students who may not have the means to attend college to get the exposure; the teaching is different, too; there's more engagement for the students and a lot of real world application." Kincaid described her colleague, Thorpe, as "very professional," adding that she appreciated that in a leader. Kincaid noted that Thorpe expects the EECHS staff to grow as professionals, stating,

Whether that's going to PDs or just exploring things that are online like new courses so that we're growing, he's always growing, he's always going to professional development . . . things that may not even be his area, but he'll come back with resources for teachers. He encourages growth. Essentially, he hires people that he knows are professional and he allows you to do whatever you need to do to make sure the kids are learning, so he's not a micromanager.

Kincaid felt that Thorpe modeled learning for the teachers and students alike, and that this contributed to the culture of learning that she feels is an integral part of the school's atmosphere. Kincaid also noted that Thorpe engages teachers in the decision-making process, citing another example related to professional development:

Whenever our school decided that we were going to create the digital transformation and personalized learning plan, I think that a lot of times that's something that kind of stays in the front office and is very top-down driven, but he got together a group of staff that designed it. There were some concerns with our staff about our professional development and how that worked at our school, because we thought that some of the sessions we were having from the district level and even some of the things that we were receiving from New Schools weren't personalized enough for our school...he allowed the teachers to redesign the professional development. Now teachers can individualize, the teachers can pick whatever subject they want to individually grow as a professional and then they have to bring that back and present a session for the rest of the staff.

Kincaid felt that Thorpe's support of teachers and the way he included them in making decisions was beneficial to students as well as the school staff. She explained that she values how Thorpe "allows the teachers to be professional," and that he does not micro-manage teaching and learning. "I don't think he's afraid of failure," commented Kincaid, as she described the trust she perceives Thorpe has for his teachers. She explained that Thorpe doesn't question unconventional teaching strategies if the teacher's ultimate goal is in the best interest of students. This trust, according to Kincaid, is one of the most positive aspects about being a teacher at EECHS.

When asked how Thorpe's leadership contributed to the school's high graduation rate and student achievement, Kincaid explained that Thorpe works closely with the high school guidance counselor and the college liaison to monitor students' progress in college

classes. “I know he works very closely with them; we have a unique group of kids; a large number of ‘at-risk’ students,” indicated Kincaid about the collaborative effort of Thorpe and his colleagues to monitor and support individual students.

Heather Dalton, Principal of Central Early College High School

Heather Dalton is the principal of Central Early College High School (CECHS). CECHS is in a school district classified as distant rural (NCES). The student population in 2014-2015 was 309, and reached 321 in 2015-2016. CECHS’s School Performance Grade was A for both 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. The graduation rate was 97% in 2015, and 100% in 2016. CECHS exceeded expected growth in both school years (NC School Report Card). The school is a five-year program, with students enrolled in high school grades nine through 13. In 2014-2015, the student body was predominantly female (60%), with 34% of students from non-white minority backgrounds. Forty-five percent of the students at CECHS qualified for free or reduced priced school meals in 2015 (NCES).

Dalton was talkative and energetic, moving at a brisk pace throughout the school. Dalton’s short stature allowed her to blend in easily with students as she encountered them on campus. Students interacted with Dalton casually, suggesting that chatting with their principal was typical at CECHS. Dalton was personable, stopping regularly to converse with teachers, staff, and visitors as she made her way about the building to visit classrooms.

The first cohort to graduate from CECHS in 2013 had a small number of students who received both a high school diploma and a college degree, but Dalton shared that the number has steadily increased. In 2016, over 85% of the school’s graduates received an

associate degree. Dalton noted that dual credit options with the community college partner and better monitoring of student progress were factors that have contributed to the improved success:

We do a better job of monitoring how students are doing towards degree completion. We were looking at progress towards the high school diploma before . . . but the college liaison and our guidance counselor are really doing a great job of contacting the college instructors, reaching out to students who might be struggling, and really pushing students to finish those degree requirements as they go.

According to Dalton, the college was willing to expand dual credit options for students significantly over the past four years. This is due in part to the way the CECHS staff worked to put support structures in place in order to help more students experience academic success in college classes. Monitoring, according to Dalton, has been key to improving the graduation rate and overall student achievement at CECHS. She explained that the entire school staff is involved in monitoring student academic performance, and that the process is collaborative:

All teachers have at least one homeroom, as well as our teacher assistant, the data manager, and our administrative assistant . . . everyone helps to monitor students. And we meet regularly to talk about how students are doing . . . we use a Google document to monitor, we color-code each student and it gets updated regularly by the homeroom teachers. The staff conferences weekly with individual students about their progress, and the counselor and I do the same thing. They know we're monitoring, they know we talk about them, so I think that's a piece of it, that we are constantly conferencing with students...we make sure that we know what every senior needs to graduate, what they've taken, what they haven't taken, what they need, and we look at their plan, what's the plan for graduation, which classes are they in this semester, what do they need next semester? We try to pay close attention to each student.

In describing her leadership style, Dalton cites collaboration as her approach, and adds that she perceives herself as a problem-solver, noting,

Well, I'm collaborative. I believe school is social and so, I don't expect teachers to work in isolation. I think that working with your peers and collaborating with your peers and having feedback from peers makes us all better at what we do. I try not to ask anybody to do something I'm not willing to do myself and I hope that teachers feel the same way about the work they give students to do, if it's not something you would do or you would find value in, let's not give it to students. I'm a problem solver and I tell students that as well as teachers.

While Dalton expressed that she believes collaboration and monitoring students are vital components of the success of CECHS, she also shared that she has high expectations, which some staff members perceive as Dalton being demanding. This, Dalton explained:

I have very high expectations, so some think I'm very demanding. They take that as authoritative and are frightened or scared that I'm going to be mad or upset or—but really I just have very, very high expectations and I want to make sure we always put students first and do what's best for students, but I do think I'm collaborative if people will come to me and talk to me and work together as a team to solve problems. I'm very impatient with adults that aren't doing their job well or who try to shirk responsibility, and that can cause tension, and yeah, I realize I'm not really warm and fuzzy and —it would help if I was a little more warm and fuzzy.

In describing what makes her a successful school leader, Dalton cited teamwork as a key, noting:

It takes everybody in this building on a daily basis to be successful. We depend on each other and because we depend on each other anybody that comes in that's a weak link either has to improve and get with the program or they have to leave, so it's a hard place to work, but I think that we all work together as a team. It is also our best asset, that's our greatest advantage, I think what makes me successful is the team I have around me. So I think we've built a very high functioning team,

and right now that's what has made me successful, that's the biggest key to our success at this point.

When asked to discuss the obstacles and problems faced by CECHS or by herself as the leader of the program, Dalton noted that she has at times experienced both isolation and frustration when dealing with district administration. One example that Dalton shared was during her first year as principal when she tried to create a master schedule for the upcoming school year. Although she had previous experience with master schedules at both the middle school and high school levels, she was not able to fully understand the basic design of the CECHS schedule. When she sought assistance from district administrators, no one was able to help her with the process, despite multiple individuals who visited the school and attempted to provide support. Dalton explained that this was a time when she felt both isolated and frustrated. "In a traditional school, I'd have had plenty of support."

Another obstacle Dalton discussed was about transportation. The students at CECHS were only provided with bus transportation to and from the community college campus for the first two years of the program. Dalton shared that she felt this was an equity issue for her students, who are not afforded equal access to transportation as their peers in the traditional schools. For Dalton, this was also a social justice issue. "When you put economically disadvantaged kids on a campus across the county, then tell them to find a ride to school, that is not acceptable," noted Dalton. Because she sees herself as an advocate for her students, especially those who may not have anyone else to advocate for them, Dalton has worked with district administration to secure bus transportation in

years three and beyond for individual students who have no other means for getting to school. “It’s not equitable yet, but it is better than it was,” Dalton shared.

Harold Kennedy, Heather Dalton’s colleague, echoed Dalton’s belief that collaboration is a key component of Dalton’s leadership style. According to Kennedy:

It’s a total collaborative effort. We deal with most things that come up as a team . . . I think she’s always been very active with her allowing other people to be leaders and allowing other people to do their own jobs, she’s able to focus on all the other stuff so she’s a true team leader.

Kennedy also noted that Dalton trusts the school staff and tries to help others grow professionally. He commented:

She’s there for support and guidance more than anything else, not to always tell you what to do. She will do that when necessary and sometimes it is necessary, but for the most part she would rather it be a collaborative effort. She wants to give autonomy to her staff . . . she trusts that you can do that stuff on your own, so that’s where her guidance comes in. She wants you to be able to your job and do it right.

When asked how Dalton’s leadership contributes to student success and to the success of CECHS, Kennedy shared how the staff works intentionally to know every student as an individual, which Kennedy identified as “that whole personalization piece.” He added that Dalton emphasizes communication with parents as a way to support students and to prevent problems:

I think one of her biggest things is making sure that everybody matters, that we know every student . . . we talk to each other, we talk to the students, we know what their needs are. I think that has helped us with several students, understanding if something is going on at home, understanding if they aren’t doing as well as they should be, struggling with a subject; making sure that we

make contact with not only the students but their families. She's always harped on that the parent should know what's going on—if the parent knows what's going on at least we have an open line of communication. The family is usually much more receptive if they've heard throughout the process instead of just when it's a major problem. So we communicate early and try to alleviate some issues. I think that has directly impacted our graduation rate because we catch a lot of problems before they become major. If a student has moved out, if a student doesn't have a computer . . . being able to catch that soon, before they start being dropped from classes or don't make it to class. I think that has saved us and saved a lot of students.

Kennedy also noted that working in a very small school requires individuals to be flexible, including the principal. He commented, “That's one of her best assets . . . she's able to do what she has to do and be flexible.” adding that when something comes up unexpectedly, it is often Dalton who handles it, because there is no extra staff.

Frank Vernon, Principal of Southern Early College High School

Frank Vernon is the principal of Southern Early College High School (SECHS). He is animated whenever he talks about the school. The building that houses most of the space reserved for SECHS is shared with other college programs, but SECHS has several large, comfortably appointed classrooms on the lower level of a relatively new building on the community college campus. The hallways are lined with large prints of SECHS students in groups. The atmosphere is welcoming and inviting. The classrooms are filled with round tables, which facilitate the collaboration of student groups. Vernon talked rapidly and with enthusiasm when we discussed his work as the leader of SECHS.

Before becoming the principal of SECHS, Vernon was a teacher, and an assistant principal. Vernon's passion was evident to students, staff, as well as visitors to SECHS. He is a champion of the early college concept, and sees himself in the students who

attend his school. Vernon confided, “I was the kid we serve because I was first generation, neither one of my parents had a four-year degree.” Thus, Vernon relates personally to the students in his school.

SECHS is in a school district classified as fringe rural (NCES). In 2014-2015, the school served approximately 226 students in grades nine through 13, although Vernon advised that less than ten students typically take advantage of the fifth year (grade 13) option. In 2015-2016, the student population was only slightly larger than the previous year, with 229 students. SECHS had 100% graduation rate in 2015, and 96.1% in 2016. The school had a School Performance Grade of A, and met expected growth in both years (NC School Report Card). The student body of SECHS was 64% female in 2014-2015, and approximately 43% of students qualified for free or reduced priced school meals. The school’s student population is approximately 50% non-white minority, which is more diverse than the district served by SECHS (NCES).

Vernon, who was the first and only principal of SECHS at the time of our interview, expressed that his experience at SECHS was pivotal in his career. “It regenerated me . . . it’s really defined my voice,” shared Vernon, adding,

I learned more about curriculum and good instruction here than I’d learned in 14 years before I got here, so just being exposed to all the training and the staff development we did and seeing what could be possible if you changed the way you taught and reframed everything, really opened up my eyes to what education should be.

According to Vernon, leading an early college program requires being comfortable with ambiguity, and having the fortitude to face the unknown. He noted,

you feel like you're cutting your own path and you have to be okay with that. You have to be okay with uncertainty, you have to be okay without much help and information. You've got to be good at that, and then you have to sell that to your staff . . . I'm coming in here telling them we're gonna be okay. I'm gonna sell it to them and tell them, 'we're going to be okay,' and I'm gonna be the first one in the line marching with them and they're not gonna know any different because I'm not gonna let them know.

When asked to clarify what he meant by this statement, Vernon indicated that, at times, he experiences frustration because of district and college administrators' lack of understanding regarding the ECHS concept, and the lack of support he experiences as a result. On the other hand, Vernon's notion of selling his vision to the teachers and staff is part of what he described as motivation, which he feels is an important part of his leadership style. Vernon feels his ability to motivate others has improved since becoming principal of SECHS. He believes his role is to motivate not only the teachers and staff, but the students as well:

I think leaders have to tell your teachers that they can do anything, and then you have to tell your kids that, and you have to believe it so in your soul that it just permeates. I usually tell the seniors, I say, 'here's the best kept secret, if I took you to Vegas they would vote against you because odds are you wouldn't do what you just did, but I didn't want to tell you that...' I know what we can do if we really try, and so I have to—it's about being that constant cheerleader, it's that constant helping to reinforce that they can do anything that they want to do, and you have to believe it, if you don't, it won't work. I guess motivation is a big part of it, I've learned how to motivate better than I did in the past.

Vernon attributes much of the success of his school to the efforts of the teachers and staff. He spoke with admiration about his dedicated and hardworking teachers, commenting, "Work as hard as my teachers work and you can get the results that they

get.” The teachers at SECHS have embraced non-traditional approaches to teaching, as advocated by Vernon:

We once had a school visit where they asked a student, ‘how much of your day is done in group work?’ and the kid responded, ‘90% of the time, the other 10% we’re changing classes.’ Notice our desks, everything? There’s not a row in this place, we don’t believe in rows until it’s test time and the desks separate for that. We use our content to teach the 21st century skills, and technology is just one of the ways we teach the content. It’s not something we add on, it’s something we do.

Vernon went on to explain that he feels strongly about collaborating with teachers and support staff to help each individual student experience success. He noted that it is up to the teachers, administrator and counselor to make adjustments when students struggle or have problems at school:

If we have issues with kids or with learning, then the first thing we look at is what do we change because we aren’t going to change that kid, so, what is it we can change, or do differently to hopefully get a change out of that kid? We’re not just gonna tell them to work harder. I guess those are my big keys.

Vernon described himself as a “big picture guy” as a leader, and he feels that his ability to “grow adults” contributes to the teachers’ and staff’s willingness to try unconventional teaching methods, work collaboratively, and keep the focus on the students. He shared:

I grow adults and I grow kids, so that’s my job, and that’s what’s gonna get our graduation rate up. It’s asking the questions, it’s not me getting my hands in there, it’s about me making sure everybody stays focused on what needs to happen. If I can keep everybody focused on the goal and what we want, then that happens, I don’t have to be the one doing it. And I find if I empower people to do stuff, they’re more apt to do it right than the way.

Vernon also noted that several former teachers from SECHS have gone on to become administrators, affirming his belief in growing and empowering others. “I want to replace myself,” he commented, because “I can’t change the mindset of current administrators.”

Vernon described himself as “fierce and protective” about his students. He feels that this is somewhat unique to principals of unique programs, like SECHS. “As an early college principal, I have to do whatever it takes to take care of my kids,” said Vernon, who also noted that serving as an advocate for his students and the SECHS program has helped define his voice.

When asked about the obstacles and problems he has encountered while leading SECHS, Vernon was quick to cite “bureaucracy . . . the bureaucratic mindset that wants to stifle innovation,” as the biggest obstacle he could identify for his school and him as a principal.

Barbara York, a colleague of Frank Vernon, agrees with Vernon regarding his focus on the Big Picture. York, who works closely with Vernon, shared,

I think we work well together because I’m the nuts and bolts and let’s get it done and what’s the plan person, and he’s the big idea, the vision kind of person, so I think we balance each other very well. I believe in his vision for the school. I’ve had no issues with doing the work behind it because I fully believe in it. I know he’s genuine and I know he loves these students and this school, so it’s been a great experience. I’ve learned a lot from him, and it’s not just been about admin stuff, it’s been about dealing with people and handling conflict.

York noted that Vernon is a collaborative leader, and that collaboration is not just between the two of them. She feels Vernon collaborates with teachers as one way of supporting them:

He's very collaborative, it's all hands on deck, he's definitely a leader in that he makes sure he knows what we need to know, he's not asking us to do things that he's not doing, so if we have to stay until midnight for an event he's here with us. If he's asking us to do things with the students he's providing the materials and the supports . . . making sure everyone has what they need and he's collaborative in the sense that he's approachable . . . teachers come in, sit down, talk with him. They can share concerns, thoughts, ideas and he listens; even when it's a no, it's a great conversation about why or how we could make this a yes.

When asked how Vernon's leadership contributes to the success of SECHS, York feels that Vernon models a strong work ethic and a passion for the early college program, and thus motivates teachers and students alike. She described this as being part of how Vernon builds a positive climate and culture at SECHS:

He sets the environment, the climate, and the culture. I think he's created the culture here and he lives it in front of us. He expects us to be pleasant, to treat each other like family, and that's what he does... I think the students see that relationship between the staff members and they believe that the staff members are genuine and caring about them and in turn, the students will bend over backwards and work hard and give everything for the teacher, so I think it trickles down.

York noted that Vernon's passion for the early college concept is personal, and shared, "It's a personal passion . . . and I have complete confidence in him because . . . he is someone who can't see himself anywhere else, doing anything else . . . he's here to impact students, it's definitely his passion."

York explained that Vernon closely monitors the seminar program at SECHS, which is a class for students designed to teach them the soft skills necessary for college, work and life; she stated, "he really pushes the seminar program that we're using here, and that has been big because it that non-academic part that works on those soft skills that

support student success.” She also stated advocating for the program and building strong relationships as strengths of Vernon’s leadership that impact success at SECHS.

Regarding obstacles and problems for SECHS, York noted that the relationship with the administration of the community college has been an evolutionary process, adding that turnover in certain key administrative offices has impacted the partnership. Likewise, during his interview, Frank Vernon noted that the one of the current college administrators was not very supportive of the program, but added that the child of another administrator is a student at SECHS. York mentioned that having the child of a college administrator as a student has had a positive impact on the partnership:

having the administrator as a parent has allowed us to forge a good relationship that allows us to talk and get more insights into the college side of it and how they view their relationship with us . . . it helps as far as bridging things better . . . we’re getting more information.

Carol Foust, Principal of Western Early College High School

Carol Foust is the founding and current principal of Western Early College High School (WECHS), which has been open since 2008. Foust is petite, vivacious, and wears a smile much of the time. She is proud of her school and the students, and feels a strong sense of pride in the program and the people she serves, commenting, “I’ll retire from here.”

Western Early College High School is situated in a district classified as midsize city (NCES). In 2014-2015, the school had 211 students, and that population grew to 219 in 2015-2016. WECHS has had a graduation rate of 100% since 2012. The school is a four-year program, with a majority of the graduates earning both a college degree and a

high school diploma in that time. WECHS is similar to the other ECHS programs in this study in that the student population is predominantly female (58%). The student population in 2014-2015 was also predominantly white (48%), but more diverse than the other schools in this study (NCES). WECHS is the only school included in the study that does not offer school provided meals to students, and as a result, no official data was available about students who might qualify for free or reduced price meals. In 2014-2015, WECHS exceeded expected growth in student achievement, and in 2015-2016, the school met expected growth (NC School Report Card).

WECHS is located in a busy urban area. While the school has classrooms and office space in one building on the edge of campus, Foust explained that students take classes in many of the other buildings and also frequent the college cafeteria and study centers. As a result, Foust mentioned that she often ‘strolls’ across the sprawling campus to check in with students, who expect to see her. It was very apparent when I visited Foust at her school that relationships with students is her primary focus as her passion for the program and her dedication to the students was obvious. She prefers to spend as much time as possible interacting with students and takes responsibility for helping every individual be successful. She stated,

I like to stroll around campus just to make sure the kids know I’m everywhere, and then I’ll hit the cafeteria at lunchtime. Snyder Hall is another place that the kids use. A lot of my time is spent sitting in classrooms, and it may not be a formal actual observation, sometimes it’s just participating in the class with the kids and the teachers. A lot of student time. I—somebody once told me if you go ahead and come in and sit in your office, you’ll never get out of it. I don’t. I’m always with the kids during the day.

As a leader, Foust described herself as student-centered, and while she did not mention being a socially just leader, that influence seemed to be an underlying factor in the ideas she shared about leadership. She is primarily concerned about students, and feels that is the heart of her school:

I believe all students can learn and I believe teachers have to find a way to teach all of them. They don't all learn the same way. They all learn differently, and it's your job as a teacher to figure that out. I also want it done with excellence and with pride, and not just going through the motions. And I constantly tell my teachers, 'If your child, your own child, had you as a teacher, would you be happy with what you're doing? Or would you be embarrassed?' I think that drives me.

Foust strives to make students responsible for their own success. "I make the student responsible. I show them how to read their transcripts," shared Foust when describing how she takes full responsibility for creating student schedules each semester to ensure students have all the courses they need for both their diploma as well as the college degree. Scheduling is important because each student's schedule is different, and it depends on his/her college schedule, explained Foust. As a result, she works directly with the college liaison to create a schedule for each student, each semester, and in that way ensures students are on track to complete both their diploma and a degree in four years. Foust commented, "We give them the transcript . . . 'here's your transcript . . . here's what you're looking for . . . here's what you need.'" Although Foust described herself as a "data junkie" and a "completer" who gets things done, she emphasized trusting relationships, especially with students, as the foundation of the WECHS culture.

Foust explained that the culture at WECHS is built on "being a successful college student," and to that end, she and the staff work to enable students to support each other.

When you're in college is when you build your support system of study buddies and those kind of things, so we tell them they're not in competition while they're here. They're helping each other get through college, and we always tell them that we want you to be successful college students and that's how we're going to treat you. We lift the bar and we don't lower it for them, and the expectation for all students is the same.

Foust feels that personalization is another important factor in the school's culture. She notes that she has been intentional about building a personalized environment at WECHS, which allows her to get to know students well, and to differentiate in order to meet the needs of individual students:

Now the processes that we put in place to support the students are different because we know students need different support systems to succeed. If this one needs to take it a little slower or this one needs to take it a little faster or this one's bored in their classes and we need to give them a fifth college class, then we can do that.

One strategy Foust described that she and her teachers and staff use to get to know students is a careful review of the ninth-grade students' permanent records files prior to the start of school each year. As Foust explained,

We have a check sheet now that goes into the folders. Every permanent records folder that has come in gives us a profile of a student. You always tell a teacher, "Go ahead and look in the folder if you think something's wrong," but what we've created this year was we took that check sheet and made the check sheet for each student so we have them in a master notebook, and you have to sign it out, bring back, you know what I mean, because it's confidential information, but it helps us get to know things about students. Was the student ever EC, have they exited EC? What middle school, what—how many schools have they attended? Do they take medicine? Is there a medical alert? Are the parents divorced? Is there—you know what I mean? All those signs that until you actually start to get to know the student, but just seeing at face value what's there in the folder that gives you all these clues. So that it gives teachers a start, so if so and so was to come to me and say, "Johnny is having a big problem in my class," well now I

can take that book out, look at that, and go, “Okay, well what are you seeing? Did you know this, this, and this about the student? Have you ever thought about this,” that kind of thing. I think that’s been a good thing that’s helped us out.

Foust emphasized the importance of personally knowing each student at WECHS well, in addition to making sure each student is known well by teachers.

When asked about obstacles and problems faced by the school or by herself as the principal of WECHS, Foust initially replied that she felt very positive about the school’s relationship with the community college and within the school district. However, early in our interview, Foust mentioned that WECHS does not offer meals to students through the school district’s child nutrition program. Foust has worked creatively to allocate resources, enlist help from parents and others, and to take personal responsibility for making sure that every student has access to meals and snacks during the school day. However, from a social justice perspective, the lack of a meal program for WECHS is an equity issue.

Foust noted that approximately 80% of the students bring lunch from home, but given the target population served by WECHS, the 20% of the students who do not bring lunch from home may very well need the school meals because they lack resources to provide for themselves. Foust described how she has confronted this problem in order to take care of the needs of the students served by her school:

There’s no free and reduced lunch, period. The kids eat on the college campus, and 80% of the kids bring their lunch. What we do on days when the college cafeteria is closed and we are in session we provide lunch, I buy pizza; the parent booster club provides lunch, and then the kids that don’t make it sometimes we have a school buddies program and they can provide a lunch card here or there. I buy one lunch card a month and I—we call it the Mrs. Foust lunch plan, I buy one

or two lunch cards and you know, when a kid is like, “Oh, Mrs. Foust, I’m hungry,” I go, “Here use my lunch card.” We do the Sam’s thing, I go to Sam’s Club and we buy breakfast cereal, granola bars, Pop Tarts, chips, applesauce, macaroni and cheese, and we supplement it, and my parent booster club does that and they know that’s what that is for, just to provide snacks and stuff for kids. And it’s worked out for years and fortunately and unfortunately. There wasn’t anywhere to serve out of and none of the classrooms met the OSHA standards. Because we talked about bagging lunch and bringing it in, but we didn’t, and it’s legal. It’s absolutely legal because we’re on the community college campus, so I mean I don’t know if you noticed, but I have the drink machines and the snack machines on the hallway, I asked for those, we don’t get the money, the college gets the money for that, but it’s better than the kids going ahead and running to another building to get it and being late for class.

Foust’s colleague, Mary Daniel, has worked at WECHS for seven of the eight years the school has been open, and explained that she has witnessed Foust grow as a principal, adding that Foust has built a school culture based on trust and relationships, especially with students. Daniel’s description of Foust’s leadership confirmed a student-centered focus:

Her leadership style, is very real . . . She tries to attend to what matters . . . She is very big on establishing personal relationships especially with students, personal relationships with students is a huge part of what she does at the school . . . she’s hands on with the kids . . . by the end of the first week of school, she knows the students’ names and she’ll know something about each kid—she’s just good at it. And the kids feel—they’re surprised when a principal knows their name . . . someone in authority to do that, for some reason that really means a lot to kids, and it grows a kind of bond to the school.

Daniel felt Foust is an expert at supporting students, especially those who struggle, adding that Foust, “has put a lot of personal energy in to those kids . . . the students care that there’s a human being who cares about them and whether they graduate or not.”

When describing Foust's relationship with teachers and staff, Daniel noted professional relationships are grounded in trust and mutual respect. "She does not micromanage" teachers, according to Daniel, trusting them to be effective leaders in their classrooms. Daniel added, "there's a lot of mutual respect." Daniel explained that as a leader, Foust is "very direct," and no nonsense, yet supportive. Foust's focus on students influences how she relates to teachers and staff, shared Daniel:

She was in my room once, during some activity I was doing with the students, and she really liked it. She stayed for the activity and did the little activity, and I felt like after that I was good with her, like she felt it was interesting—she is so connected to the kids, she wants the kids to be engaged, and so if the class is engaging to the them, or would be engaging to her, she's happy.

Daniel also noted that Foust supports teacher leadership and collaboration through the Professional Learning Team (PLT) in which all teachers participate. She explained that Foust empowers teachers to lead each PLT session, and the team also functions as the school improvement team. "We can discuss the plan at the end of every PLT session, so it works," commented Daniel.

When asked what made Foust a successful leader, Daniel responded, "Relationships, confidence, a kind of fearlessness." Daniel also noted that Foust is an effective multi-tasker and an extrovert who thrives on dealing with the unexpected, "she loves it . . . it's more exciting." When asked how Foust has contributed to the success of WECHS, Daniel commented,

I think she has intentionally set the culture of the school as being a little bit informal. It surprises the kids by being a little bit informal and it really works; it makes the students feel super comfortable, so there's a comfort level... There's

something symbolic about her that I wouldn't have known before I came to this school . . . I think maybe what kids expect from principals—either they're going to be super formal or super remote or super something—and when they're warm and when they're caring, it means a lot to kids. It grows the culture.

Thematic Analysis

After analyzing the data for this study, the following themes emerged: student-centered focus, servant leadership, and a theme I have called The Unicorn Effect. The following section discusses each of these themes as they relate to the leadership of early college high schools.

Student-centered Focus

The principals, teachers, and other school staff members who were interviewed for this study all described their schools as student-centered learning organizations. Schools that are student-centered employ a variety of methods and strategies to meet the needs of individual students and enhance student learning (Abbott, 2014). One way that the ECHS programs in this study maintained a student-centered focus was by forging strong relationships with students. For example, in the interviews, the principals emphasized the importance of teachers building relationships with students. This is not surprising, given the focus placed on “the new 3 R’s” of rigor, relevance, and relationships by the national ECHSI and NC New Schools (AIR/SRI, 2006, p. 2). Patricia Everett noted that she expects teachers to focus on students as individuals as a part of personalizing instruction for all at NECHS. Similarly, Heather Dalton felt that knowing each student’s individual needs has positively impacted the graduation rate at CECHS. Carol Foust explained, “You have to benefit the kids 100% of the time. It’s always about

the kids.” Brian Thorpe, principal of EECHS, echoed the same sentiment, “We know our students. We’re able to meet their needs very quickly and they feel comfortable talking to us.” Both Harold Kennedy and Mary Daniel cited the ability to build strong relationships with students as a way their principals have positively impacted the graduation rate and student achievement in their schools.

Student-centered schools engage students in the process of learning and teachers are often facilitating rather than directly teaching (Jones, 2007). Carol Foust and Frank Vernon discussed the importance of encouraging students to work with peers, for academic and social reasons. Vernon commented,

I believe that students should be working in groups, not just for the learning part of it but the social part of it. I noticed that we have less discipline because if you’ve got to learn to work with somebody you gotta learn how to understand that person, so it goes beyond just the academic.

Foust also noted, “We don’t tell them you’re in 9th grade or 10th grade, we tell them they’re in cohorts; we want them to be like brothers and sisters and help each other out.”

Brian Thorpe and Patricia Everett described the teacher-as-facilitator types of teaching and learning strategies they expect to see on a regular basis in their schools, which also supports a student-centered focus. As Everett stated, “I want the teachers to have the students speak every day. I want them writing every day. They work on presentations, public speaking skills all the time.” Similarly, Thorpe shared:

I really want to see and hear student engagement... I like a lot of change of state, and not a lot of teachers doing a lot of the talking. I think I want to see a lot of kids doing more talking than the teachers.

Frank Vernon expressed the same beliefs and expectations about student-center instruction:

I believe instruction should be hands-on. They need to touch it, feel it, smell it. We look at those 21st century skills that everybody talks about...those aren't add-ons. Those are actually what we're trying to teach. And we go after every kid and meet them where they are, and we take them where they're supposed to be. That's my bottom line. I mean I'm just really into that...if we do that stuff and they read, write, think, speak, each class, each day, every kid, you will get the results.

The teachers and other school staff members who were interviewed embraced a student-centered approach to learning as well. Olivia Martin felt supported by her principal, Patricia Everett, as she has implemented a student-centered focus in her classroom. Martin explained,

Learning has to be student-centered . . . I teach students, I do not teach English and I cannot do the same thing every year with every group of students because every group of students is not the same. I believe very much that learning should be an inquiry-based, hands-on process for students that I should do very little talking in my classroom and Mrs. Everett has definitely reinforced that idea in my classroom as she's given me feedback . . . she likes that I am not lecturing, and she definitely encourages project-based learning, which is something we're focused on this year. I've been involved with that and she is very supportive of whatever I need when I'm doing that and she gives me a lot of flexibility to have my students in the multipurpose room outside of my classroom all day, to invite other classes to come in and I think that goes back again to the trust she has in her teachers because she knows that we don't have to be in our classrooms, sitting in rows, looking at the front of the classroom. She knows that learning is still taking place, so that idea of being student-centered is really what I base everything on.

Mary Daniel used a swimming analogy to describe her beliefs about student-centered instruction and learning:

I feel like one of my jobs is to sort of be a mediator between what the curriculum is meant to be and where kids are at any given moment, and to try to cross that divide for them by finding texts and activities and things. I feel that I want kids to be thinking as much as possible and not tuning out. I don't talk that much in the classroom, I mean I talk, but I don't lecture very much. Most of our teachers don't. So I believe in trying to get kids active, but at the same time, I don't believe that all group work is the answer, I'm very aware of the introverts in my classroom, and I really try to find a balance, so I also try to give, probably more than most teachers, I try to give kids individual time in my classroom to write, and I feel like kids can learn literature through writing, so it's a win-win. But I—a couple of days a week you would walk in my classroom and the lights would be dimmed, and kids would be sitting, some of them under tables, and they'd had headphones in, and they'd be at their computers and they'd be writing, so it's my belief that they're more likely to be tuned into and learning while they're doing that than if I'm talking to them, you know the analogy that I've used before is, if you go to a swim class you don't just watch your teacher swim, you need to swim, and so I really try to get my kids to swim a lot of the time.

In addition to building relationships with students and using a variety of student-centered strategies for teaching and learning, the school leaders and their colleagues discussed how their schools closely monitor students and provide support to students who might be struggling academically or otherwise. At several of the schools, technology is used as a tool to help the entire staff monitor students. Everett, Thorpe, and Dalton use a web-based document, shared with the entire teaching staff, counselor, and others at the school to monitor students on a regular basis. At EECHS, the high school shares a Google document with college instructors to collect information about student progress in college classes. This data is shared with the high school teachers, so that support for individual students may be provided. As Thorpe explained:

A lot of progress monitoring and talking about it and sharing the results. All teachers are involved. And we've even talked about seminar and trying to be a little more purposeful there. I share information with the teachers. If there's anybody on academic warning, the teachers have a little conference with them, so

the more people know, the more people that talk to these students, and they're like, "Wow. There are people are watching me."

At CECHS, Dalton and her colleague, Harold Kennedy, also use a Google document to monitor students, in both high school and college classes, and each person on the staff who works with students is expected to take part in the monitoring process. Dalton explained that the entire staff meets weekly to "talk about students" and Kennedy believes that this close monitoring has impacted the school's high school graduation rate as well as the percentage of graduates who also earn their college degree.

Servant Leadership

A second theme that emerged from the analysis of the data collected for this study is servant leadership. Characteristics of servant leadership that were discussed by the principals and/or their colleagues included the principals' caring nature and efforts to empower others; the focus on collaboration and shared decision making; and setting a vision for the school (Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks, 2007). Two principals cited servant leadership in describing their own practice. Carol Foust explained that she strives to be "firm, fair, and consistent" as a leader, and indicated that it is important to show others that "you're a real person." When asked to discuss her leadership style, Foust shared,

It's more service, I think. it's more about the heart and the service than it is the big ego, but I also know that I have to show everybody that I'm human and I'm not afraid to make mistakes. Because—just because I'm the principal doesn't mean I have all the answers, but I know how to find them. I go above and beyond . . . I want more personal power versus positional power. I want others to like the atmosphere we've created, like the processes that are in place, but also have an

opinion and be able to help me see the things I can't see. I want to say it's a community thing.

Brian Thorpe posited a similar feeling when asked about his approach to leadership, "I think I'm a collaborative leader, trying to do as much servant leadership as I possibly can. I am not as much top down as I used to be."

The ECHS principals were described by their colleagues as trusting and supportive, reflecting their caring nature. Olivia Martin expressed her gratitude for Patricia's Everett's trust, noting, "I feel like she trusts me as a teacher and appreciates what I'm doing." Martin also described Everett as a good listener, and explained that Everett works to put structures in place in the school to support students and teachers, and to remove barriers so that teachers can focus on teaching and learning. Similarly, Harold Kennedy commented about Heather Dalton, "She wants to be able to trust that you can do it on your own, and allow you to grow from that." He added that Dalton is supportive, and willing to step in as needed to help individuals achieve success. Mary Daniel described Carol Foust as a caring leader, noting that students realize she cares about them and is interested in their success.

In describing Frank Vernon's leadership, his colleague, Barbara York explained that Vernon cares for the staff, which in turn impacts how the staff relates to the students:

He's modeling for the students and for us and he takes care of his staff . . . he'll have that conversation where that they can vent, 'what's going on, how can I help you?' That definitely makes teachers feel appreciated and willing to work hard and that's one of the reasons they do work so hard and give so much and bend over backwards to make sure that the students are successful . . . because he's preaching something, but he's modeling, he's living that for us . . .

Brian Thorpe expressed his caring and supportive nature in his comments about how he sees himself as a leader:

I make sure I remove obstacles and provide them a positive environment, I think it trickles down to the kids. I feel like I'm responsible for everything in this building . . . I've set up the ACT mock test myself and set up the rooms and graded it myself, and—so that's just one data point, but just to let them know how serious I am about my support.

Thorpe also feels that two-way communication is vital, and a major component in that is being a good listener, commenting, "I'm compassionate and a good listener . . . I'm good about 'we' versus 'I' when I'm talking. I love talking to teachers . . . and picking their brain."

In addition to being supportive and caring, the principals in this study also work to build positive relationships with teacher and to empower them as leaders. As Brian Thorpe noted about building relationships with teachers, "In forming those relationships, you get to know their strengths. Not just talking about school, you know about their children, you know about their family . . . and I get to know their strengths." He added that empowering teachers by giving them roles and responsibilities, along with accountability, is how he encourages and supports teachers' professional growth and develops their capacity as leaders. In small schools where the principal often delegates responsibilities and tasks to teachers and other staff members, knowing an individual's strengths is essential for the success of the program.

Heather Dalton explained that she believes collaboration as a school staff helps to promote teacher leadership. She commented that working collaboratively on student success and school improvement is empowering to teachers:

Teachers feel invested, they feel empowered. They know I depend on them and so that mutual dependency, even though I may be the leader among leaders, the first leader among the leaders in the building, everybody here's a leader in some way at some time at something and that's a powerful way to get things done.

Dalton's colleague, Kennedy, concurred about Dalton's desire to develop teachers as leaders, "her big thing is always trying to grow leaders, whether that's in the school, in the community, in the district, whatever it may be, she doesn't want to hold anyone back."

Two additional characteristics of servant leadership, shared decision-making and collaboration, are embraced by the principals, who use these strategies to support and empower teachers. The entire staff participates on the school leadership teams at the schools included in the study. Being a part of this team engages teachers and other staff members in the decision-making processes and ensures that they have a voice. Patricia Everett's colleague, Olivia Martin, expressed appreciation for the way Everett strives to provide teachers and others with information and to engage them in decisions:

She definitely wants our staff to be a part of every decision. I have never felt like she made all the decisions and just bossed us around. That has never been the feeling here. It's always been she presents us with whatever information she has. Sometimes I even wonder why we need to know all this stuff she tells us but she always wants to make sure that we're informed and then we really do make decisions together as a staff.

NECHS teachers collaborate in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). According to Everett, their ability to collaborate is also enhanced by their use of technology:

We monitor what's going on in the PLCs. We use Schoology. I run everything to the PLCs through a faculty page that I've created in Schoology. This is where we all share resources, and we can see who shared an article about project-based learning, and so forth. The teachers are always doing that when they find articles that are worth reading. I put everything here as well, faculty meetings, also PLC agendas, and what is expected. And I have it by department. Sometimes they may meet in grade level. But sometimes the PLC is teacher driven. Like one of the first things that they did this year, as a grade level they identified a common problem, or an issue that they saw with all freshman or all sophomores. 'What is the biggest thing you want to teach your kids?' They identified them, and then it was each teacher's responsibility to try to find resources or proof, strategies to teach those skills, and they shared it by posting here.

Everett also noted that teacher collaboration at NECHS has improved during her tenure. She explained that having all teachers participate on the School Improvement Team and engage in visiting other's classrooms during instructional rounds has enhanced their collaborative efforts.

At WECHS, the school improvement team functions as a Professional Learning Team (PLT), like the PLCs at NECHS, and all teachers participate in the weekly meetings. The teachers take turns leading the weekly meetings, and the focus is determined by the goals established by the group for the School Improvement Plan (SIP). The group monitors student progress, as well as the overall progress of the school towards achieving the SIP goals. Mary Daniel commented that she feels this contributes to the success of the students and the school.

Establishing a vision for the school is another characteristic of servant leadership embraced by the principals in this study. At EECHS, Pam Kincaid explained Brian

Thorpe's approach, describing Thorpe as a "big picture guy" who steps in as needed, sets the vision and, "makes sure that all staff understand what the vision is and the direction that we want to head."

Barbara York, a colleague of Frank Vernon at SECHS, describes Vernon's approach to establishing a shared vision for the school as modeling:

He's not aggressive with it, it's not in your face, but it does just kind of sneak up on you, it's like the kudzu analogy he uses. You watch him do it and you do it because you see it...you see him loving kids, you see him pushing for what's best for kids, you see him handling conflict in a way that's uplifting. Even just his style of discipline, you know, it's not 'gotcha' kind of thing, it was always about growing and building and then you understand where he's coming from, and you see the way it gives the kid confidence and that they bounce back and it wasn't the shame and that kind of thing. You just grow into it, you just kind of fall into it with him.

The Unicorn Effect

A unique theme that emerged from analyzing the data for this study was the isolation and frustration often felt by the ECHS principals and echoed by some of their colleagues. One principal described the isolation by comparing the role to being a unicorn. Other principals shared similar sentiments. As Heather Dalton explained, "we're unicorns in most school districts because there's only one ECHS, so peer collaboration is a challenge." Carol Foust concurred:

In the district you're kind of on your own island, because I'm in a big district and I'm one of 18 high schools, so when I'm at the district level meeting with the other high schools, I always know I'm the exception and not the rule. I always joke with my assistant superintendent, I say, 'I'm a consultant.' I'm in the room to consult and not say how it affects me because it only affects one and not all 18. I really only chime in when I have something to say that benefits the group. I think being different though, I kind of operate on my own.

Frank Vernon expressed the isolation as a feeling of loneliness, “it’s lonely because nobody understands except for other ECHS principals; the district doesn’t understand . . . the college doesn’t understand.” He added that ECHS principals must learn to manage with limited support and resources from the district and the college partners. Both Dalton and Patricia Everett feel that the lack of information about how to lead a cooperative, innovative ECHS contributed to their sense of isolation. As Everett explained:

When I started as principal here, I didn’t know much about an early college, even when I searched for it on Google. And when I sat in that chair, I realized just how much people don’t understand about the program or the process. So honestly, I didn’t get much assistance--and this is not a negative comment towards our district in any way—but no one could help me.

Dalton described her experience, very similar to Everett’s:

I felt so isolated initially because there was not another early college principal that I knew. I have met some great early college principals and I do feel like I have a support system now, but the first two years I had no idea who to call. My mentor here in the district was very helpful as far as what to do regarding district expectations, but not very helpful about my master schedule, even the director that I reported to and the assistant superintendent couldn’t help me with my master schedule, and I had never done a master schedule like this before, so it was extremely challenging to learn to do my job without any help and without any support. I really had to just figure it out on my own. I had a leadership coach from New Schools but I only saw her occasionally.

In addition to feeling isolated at times, the principals also expressed feelings of frustration associated with misconceptions about their schools and with the inequities faced by their schools and students. Patricia Everett shared that the common misconceptions about her school are that she doesn’t have to deal with discipline issues and all the students in her school are innately bright and high achieving. She also noted

that other principals in the district often do not understand the amount of work she must complete on her own is comparable to what a team of administrators and others handle in a traditional high school. Carol Foust discussed a common misconception she has confronted in her school district, because of the success of her students and the school:

They know which kids from their schools are coming to my school, but once they get to my school there's this perception that I took everybody's top 10. That they're all AIG. Because WECHS is successful, they assume the reason we're successful is because we're taking everybody's good kids. I'm like, 'You all know better than that. Your top 10 is going to go to a top school somewhere probably on a full ride; they don't need a free community college degree.'

Both Patricia Everett and Heather Dalton expressed concern over the obstacles some of their students face in getting to and from school, often riding the bus for more than an hour or having to provide their own transportation because their college classes are not scheduled within the regular school day. They view this as an equity issue, unique to their schools, since students attending traditional high schools do not face the same situation regarding transportation to and from school. Frank Vernon and his colleague, Barbara York, had similar concerns about the inequities faced by students at SECHS, noting that student services personnel, such as a nurse, social worker or school psychologist are only available to their students on a consultative basis. As York explained:

Our children still have needs, they still get sick, maybe not at the same rate, but still more than once a month. We can't schedule things like that . . . We definitely have students who need support in dealing with the stress and the challenge of this program, and I don't think they can always wait until next Thursday to have a meltdown.

Like York, Olivia Martin at NECHS was concerned that their students do not have regular access to resources that are readily available at traditional schools:

our students deal with a lot of issues outside of this school that we cannot do a whole lot about sometimes. We have so many kids with mental health issues or family issues or dealing with extreme poverty, and those are hard things to overcome when you're a teenager in high school, particularly in a demanding school, so just trying to get these kids where they need to be emotionally and mentally sometimes can be a struggle, and sometimes we're running around to get social workers . . .

However, despite the obstacles, Martin praised Patricia Everett's tireless efforts to work with the student services personnel assigned to serve her school, to put supports in place for students in need, "she does work with those resource people to then work with families to try to make sure kids are where they need to be."

An equity issue faced by students and staff at WECHS is that the district does not provide meals to students, not even those who would qualify for free or reduced price breakfast and lunch. Carol Foust explained that because the school is housed on the community college campus, the district is not required to offer meals through the child nutrition program. However, since many of her students do not have the financial resources to bring their own lunches or to purchase food from the college's cafeteria, Foust personally purchases meal cards from the cafeteria to share with students on an as needed basis, and maintains an assortment of snacks for students to access during the day.

Summary

The principals in this study have unique approaches for leading their schools. During the interviews, each principal discussed numerous factors that impacted or

influenced his/her leadership practice, and each described specific strategies and behaviors he/she employed on a regular basis to deal with the demands of being the sole administrator in a cooperative, innovative, early college program. While each principal's leadership strategy was unique, certain perceptions about leadership, as well as specific strategies emerged from this study as factors that were common to some, if not all, of the principals. The principals perceived themselves to be collaborative, trusting, supportive, and highly engaged with the students in their schools. Their colleagues had similar perceptions of their leaders, describing them as transparent, supportive, caring, trusting, data-driven, empowering, visionary, and collaborative. The colleagues all perceived the principals to have a significant impact on the success of the schools and their students. After careful analysis of the data collected for this study, three themes were identified. The main themes are: student centered focus, servant leadership, and the unicorn effect. Based on the self-perceptions of the principals, and the perceptions of their colleagues, the principals at NECHS, ECHS, CECHS, WECHS, and SECHS all worked to keep the focus on students and student success. They demonstrated several characteristics of servant leadership, and two identified servant leadership as a style they embraced. The principals also expressed similar feelings of isolation, concern, and frustration, grouped into the theme named the unicorn effect because of the analogy used by one principal to describe how she perceived her situation.

Everett, Thorpe, Dalton, Vernon, and Foust maintained a focus on students and student-centered instruction by fostering positive relationships between students and peers, students and teachers, and between students and themselves. Several colleagues

reported that the principals visited classrooms regularly and frequently engaged with students. The principals did not rely solely on teachers and other staff to monitor students, but were directly engaged in that process along with their staff, and worked collaboratively to plan and provide support for students who needed it.

Characteristics of servant leaders were demonstrated by each of the principals. Thorpe and Foust strive to implement servant leadership practices intentionally. While the other leaders did not directly reference servant leadership as a deliberate part of their practice, they displayed qualities such as trust, concern, and compassion, all of which are associated with servant leadership. All of the principals discussed their purposeful collaboration with teachers and others to monitor and support students and also to empower teachers to develop as professionals and as people. Perhaps because of the small size of the school staffs, all of the principals directly involve teachers and others in the decision-making processes for the school. At least three of the principals were noted for their efforts to establish a clear, shared vision for the school, and to communicate that vision to all.

Unfortunately, many of the principals in the study reported feelings of isolation, because there is usually only one ECHS program in each school district, much like a unicorn in a stable of horses. Perhaps this is because those who are not familiar with the background or mission of ECHS programs simply view the schools as a small version of a traditional high school on a college campus. Several principals or their colleagues shared concerns and frustrations about the common misconceptions they confronted in their district or at the college. Concerns about inequities that challenge their students and

their schools were also expressed. Limited bus transportation, a lack of access to student support personnel such as nurses, social workers and psychologists, and the lack of a child nutrition program at one school were described as obstacles and issues of equity by a number of the principals and colleagues in this study. Despite these challenges and frustrations, the principals expressed a passion for their school and the students, and a dedication to supporting and empowering teachers and staff.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

—Dorothy Gale

The purpose of the qualitative, multi-site case study was to explore the leadership practices of early college high school principals based on their self-perceptions and the perceptions of their colleagues. Specifically, I sought to closely examine the strategies and behaviors used by principals at ECHSs that have a school performance grade of A, and a graduation rate of 95% or higher. This chapter reviews the results of my study, and offers conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further study based on the knowledge I've gained from this work.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013). The criteria for inclusion in the study was the principal served at a school where the graduation rate for 2015 was high (95% or higher), the 2014-2015 School Performance Grade was A, and the principal had served in his/her school for at least three years. Informal, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from principals and their colleagues regarding their perceptions of the principals' leadership practices, skills, and qualities. Observation notes were taken during the visits to the school sites to conduct the interviews. In addition, documents from each school were also analyzed, including NC

School Report Cards and School Improvement Plans. The school websites were explored, and notes from this process were analyzed as well.

Summary of Findings

School Demographics

The five schools included in the study had graduation rates of 95% or higher for 2015 and 2016. Three schools had 100% graduation rate in 2015, and four had 100% graduation rate in 2016. This supports the findings of Nodine (2009) and Berger et al. (2013) that ECHS graduation rates are higher than the national average for all high school students. All five schools had an A School Performance Grade in 2015, and 4 schools had the same grade in 2016, with one school earning a B that year. This supports the research of Edmunds et al. (2012) that ECHS students achieve at high levels academically.

Based on the analysis of school demographic data, the schools in this study serve the target population for ECHS programs, with student populations that mirror the racial diversity of the district or, in the case of two schools, the student populations were more racially diverse than the school district. Data about free and reduced price lunch eligibility was available for four of the participants' schools. Based on this information, the schools serve a significant percentage of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds as well when compared to the overall percentages for each school district.

Given that the ECHS programs included in this study serve a number of students from the target populations, including students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, students from racial and/or ethnic minority backgrounds, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and other traditionally marginalized groups

of students, there was an underlying expectation that the leaders of these schools would be motivated, at least in part, by the influence of social justice theory. I did not find this to be the case. However, there were instances where several principals demonstrated certain characteristics of social justice leadership or where a principal dealt with an issue that reflected principles of socially just schools, and those are discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Research Question 1

How does the ECHS principal balance the mandates of the local school district and the higher education partner with the daily demands of leading a small, innovative high school?

When asked how they balance the demands of their school district, the higher education partner and the daily operation of the school, the principals who participated in the study indicated that it is a challenge they confront regularly. Several felt the school district leaders' lack of understanding about the program contributed to the situation. Likewise, two principals also shared that the lack of understanding about the ECHS concept and the lack of knowledge about teaching adolescents on the part of the college partners had contributed to strained relations between the ECHS and the college administration at times. Watson (2011) reported that ECHS principals in her study believed that college instructors who were unwilling or unprepared to work with and support high school students were a hindrance to the success of the ECHSs. Similarly, in the research related to the small schools movement, Goodwin and Page (2002) found that

a lack of understanding at the district level about the small schools paradigm may hinder the implementation or sustainability of the concept.

The struggle to find a balance between the requirements of the district and the demands of being the sole administrator at a high school varied from one site to another. The findings from this study reveal that school district administrators were sometimes willing to work with ECHS principals to achieve a better balance, but not always. Brian Thorpe felt having the former principal of the EECHS at the district office helped him in dealing with the demands of the district because she understood the program. Patricia Everett explained that she asked for permission to submit the Impact Plan as the School Improvement Plan (SIP). The district eventually approved her request, after four traditional schools in the district started working with North Carolina New Schools (NCNS) on another initiative, and were also required to do the Impact Plan. However, at CECHS Heather Dalton shared that the district required her school to do a separate SIP, in addition to the Impact Plan, that was required by NCNS annually.

Carol Foust felt that her long-term working relationship with the assistant superintendent has helped her find a balance with some requirements from the district. She explained that she no longer tries to follow district directives and mandates in the same manner as the traditional high school administrators. She shared that she often goes to the assistant superintendent to follow up about such issues:

I really only chime in when I have something to say that benefits the group and then kind of meet with her later and say, 'Okay. I know you said this, this, and this. This is how we're different and how we're going to deal with it.' I think being different though, I kind of operate on my own. I operate on my own and I think being here eight years is to my advantage because I've had—my assistant

superintendent has been with me five out of the eight years, so she trusts me and she knows that I'm going to make good decisions that benefit kids.

Foust's ability to negotiate with district administrators allowed her to challenge the status quo and to achieve differentiated considerations for her school. These findings are also consistent with the research of Peters (2011) and Goodwin and Page (2002) that districts sometimes granted greater autonomy to the leaders of small, innovative high schools.

Heather Dalton described a situation where the district required a PLC model that did not work at CECHS, because of the size of the teaching staff:

What our district requires—in theory it's great, and I think it works well at traditional schools. It's 'Job Alike' PLCs. The teachers that teach the same subject collaborate . . . they are developing common assessments, they're analyzing data together, and then they're figuring out what to do when kids don't get it. But it's hard when you have two people and they both teach English, but not the same course, so there's no common assessments. The analysis becomes artificial, and so that mandate is kind of forcing a round peg to a square hole, and it doesn't fit well. We had moved away from that for two years, but there've been changes in leadership, and they've told us we have to do it again.

In order to meet the needs of her students and staff, while also trying to fulfill the mandate of the district, Dalton adapted the district's PLC model to the unique context of CECHS. The entire teaching staff, along with Dalton and the guidance counselor, held weekly meetings to discuss students' academic performance, and collaboratively developed ways to support students as needed. Dalton also noted that the teachers at CECHS have continued the school-based PLCs that teachers organized when the district allowed school-based decisions for PLCs. These findings support the research of Webb & Gerwin (2014) and AIR/SRI (2009) that found ECHSs put support systems in place for

all students, and work collaboratively to help students develop the academic and social skills needed to be successful in college

Patricia Everett worked to provide access to computers for her students who could not afford them when the district implemented a ‘bring your own device’ initiative. Similarly, Carol Foust endeavored to provide access to meals and snacks on a daily basis for her students who could not bring their own food because her district did not provide meals to the students at her school. Both Everett and Foust demonstrated characteristics of social justice leadership by working to create change in their schools rather than simply trying to implement the mandates. According to Hammonds (2015), ECHS principals act as socially just leaders when they challenge the status quo and create change in their schools. These principals advocated for their students and their schools and implemented innovative and creative strategies to meet the needs of their students.

A 2012 study by Carter that examined the leadership styles used by ECHS principals in Ohio found that strong communication skills are essential. Two of the principals in this study reported that communication with the school district and the community college partner, and between the two, are important factors in how they find a balance and lead their schools effectively. As Frank Vernon shared,

I was a translator because the college didn’t understand the high school, and the district didn’t understand the college and when the district and the college start talking about things, I would have to translate for them to get them to understand each other—I’ve learned more micro-political leadership.

Brian Thorpe expressed that his ability to maintain regular, open communication with the school district and the community college has contributed to the very positive relationship that EECHS now has with the college. Thorpe explained:

I really do a good job communicating with my superintendent. I constantly share things that we're doing as a staff, not bombard them, but I let them know what we're doing. Keeping them up to date with our school improvement and our impact plan. I use email, I meet with them, and I'm really purposeful when I meet with my assistant superintendent, who's my evaluator. I kind of show him what the early college is all about, he came from a big traditional high school, and probably has his own perceptions on things, but I'll send him articles that I've been reading . . . We were recognized by the US News and World Report, I send stuff like that, not to brag, I just want to send something positive. Then on the college side, we've got a great relationship. We'll meet a few times a year and I'll give them updates. I'll give them data. I'll tell them how well our new policy's going.

These findings also align with the research of Stronge, Richard, and Catano (2008) that effective principals develop and maintain multiple channels of communication. Peters (2011) also found that the principals of small schools must be capable communicators who articulate a clear vision of their school to stakeholders and the community.

Each principal approached balancing the demands of the community college partner with the daily demands of leading his/her school differently. At CECHS, Heather Dalton explained that initially, the college faculty and staff operated from the notion that CECHS students should be treated exactly like traditional college students, who were older and had already graduated from high school. In addition, the college instructors did not feel the need to report to the college liaison or high school staff regarding student performance. Dalton and her colleague, Harold Kennedy, along with the college liaison prepared a presentation and a resource manual to inform the college community about the

ECHS concept and the CECHS program specifically. Since then, they have seen improved relations and communication with the college instructors and increased student success in college courses. Carol Foust worked directly with the college liaison to create a schedule for each student to ensure the student made progress toward diploma and degree requirements simultaneously. At SECHS, the relationship with the community college improved after an administrator's child became a student at SECHS. Watson (2011) reported similar findings in her study of ECHS principals and successful change strategies implemented in the ECHS model. Watson noted that it is important for ECHS principals to know the concept well, and to share information about the school with all stakeholders. Stronge et al. (2008) also reported that effective principals must be able to connect with people in other organizations to "solve common problems and pursue shared purposes" (p. 120).

Flexibility was cited by several of the participants in the study to describe how ECHS principals balanced outside demands with leading an innovative ECHS. Carol Foust commented that she does whatever it takes to run the school, from covering classes when a substitute does not show up to personally creating every student's class schedule. Similarly, Harold Kennedy at CECHS noted flexibility as a strength of Heather Dalton's. At SECHS, Frank Vernon's colleague, Barbara York shared about Vernon, "he's not asking us to do something he's not doing" and this, she explained, motivates the teachers and others to go above and beyond, "I think that's one of the reasons they work so hard and give so much and bend over backwards to make sure that the students are successful." This finding confirms the results of Rich's (2011) research on the leadership

characteristics of middle college and ECHS principals. He found that the principals in his study were willing to go above and beyond in order to support quality teaching and learning opportunities for teachers and students. Rich noted, “they were able to wear many hats effectively and to be able to change these hats as needed in a smooth and logical fashion seeing different situations from many different viewpoints” (p. 111). In the research on small high school programs, similar findings were reported by Peters (2011) who noted that principals of small, nontraditional high schools must take on multiple roles not typically associated with the principalship.

In summary, the principals who participated in this study each employed a unique approach to leading their schools while balancing demands from the district and the community college partner. Their approaches included:

- Negotiating with district administration
- Advocating for the school, staff, and students
- Challenging requirements that did not work in the ECHS context
- Modifying or adapting programs
- Creating change as needed
- Communicating with stakeholders
- Flexibility

This is consistent with Hallinger’s (2011) review of the literature that found leadership for improved teaching and learning should be based on the needs of the school, and dependent upon the school context, not dependent upon prescribed one-size-fits-all models of good leadership.

Research Question 2

Based on the perceptions of ECHS principals and their colleagues, what are the leadership strategies and/or behaviors practiced by ECHS principals to promote student success (as measured by graduation rate and standardized test scores) at their schools?

The principals in this study engaged with students on a regular basis. They understood that monitoring and supporting students are essential factors that contribute to the success of individual students and to the school. Research on school leadership suggests that the influence of school administrators on student achievement is second only to the influence of classroom teachers, and the abilities of the principal are essential to the development of schools focused on learning for all students (Leithwood et al., 2004). The ECHS principals who were participants in this study understood that they impact teaching and learning, and they employed a variety of strategies and behaviors in an effort to improve both. This supports the findings of Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005) that the principal's attitudes and behaviors are a significant factor in creating a school context where students are successful.

Student-centered. The principals in my study were passionate as they discussed students. They worked collaboratively with their teachers and staff to create schools that were inviting, student-centered learning environments. They demonstrated a student-centered approach to leading their schools by:

- Building and maintaining relationships with students, and expecting teachers and other staff to do the same;

- Encouraging the use of innovative, creative instructional strategies, and supporting teachers;
- Having high expectations for ALL students;
- Promoting personalized learning for every student;
- Working collaboratively with teachers and staff to monitor student progress and providing individualized support as needed.

Relationships. The principals in this study focused on students, and they engaged directly with students on a regular basis. During the interviews, each principal shared at least one story about his/her interactions with a specific student, usually to provide support or to encourage a student who was facing a challenging situation. They expected teachers to build strong, trusting relationships with students in order to stay connected and show support for each individual. This finding demonstrates that these principals worked to implement the ECHS Initiative's expectation that relationships be a core foundation in partner schools (AIR/SRI, 2006). Carol Foust explained that she works to build positive relationships with students by getting to know each one personally as soon as possible. Foust's colleague, Mary Daniel commended Foust's ability to not only know each student's name within the first weeks of school, but also something interesting about the student. Hammonds (2015) and Cravey (2013) reported similar findings—that ECHS programs provide students with supportive, family-like environments focused on relationships.

Innovative, creative approaches teaching and learning. ECHS principals in this study provided opportunities for teachers to implement creative, new approaches to

teaching and learning. In these relatively new schools, innovation was often the norm. At EECHS, Brian Thorpe expects students to be highly engaged in challenging work on a regular basis. He encouraged teacher collaboration, team teaching, and the integration of technology as a tool that transforms learning, not as a substitute for paper and pencil. Thorpe's staff has embraced their leader's passion for learning and technology, as evidenced by their collaborative, school-wide technology plan which was printed on large posters and displayed on the walls of the conference room when I visited the campus to conduct interviews. Thorpe's colleague, Pam Kincaid, felt that he supported her and other teachers to be creative and try different strategies, as long as their goal was to improve teaching and learning. She also shared that Thorpe encourages teachers to attend professional development and models learning for students and staff. According to Jones (2007), student-centered schools embrace innovative instructional strategies and work to engage students in the process of learning.

High expectations. Another strategy commonly employed by the principals was establishing high expectations for all students. The principals embraced the premise that students will succeed and reach high expectations if given challenging, engaging work and the support needed to develop the skills and knowledge required--which is one of the basic tenants of the ECHS Initiative (JFF, n.d.). Patricia Everett explained that she felt the clearly communicated high expectations that she has put in place at NECHS have contributed to the improved academic success for the students. According to studies by the Wallace Foundation (2013), successful principals "define and promote high expectations" (p. 11). Hammonds (2015) reported similar findings, noting that the ECHSs

in her study believed all students in their schools, regardless of background, can achieve at a high level if given appropriate support.

Personalized learning. The principals and their colleagues who participated in this study consistently mentioned the collaboration that took place at their schools, in which the principal actively participated. Often, they described collaborative efforts focused on monitoring individual students, planning individual supports strategies and interventions, and other ways to personalize learning for each student. At NECHS, Patricia Everett, the guidance counselor, and all teachers meet on a weekly basis to discuss how students are doing academically, and otherwise. They use technology to share a document for this purpose. If and when a student struggles, teachers provide academic support. Everett and the counselor meet with the student, and often they meet with parents as well. Everett explained that while she has established very high expectations for all students, she believes the key to student success is that she and her teachers and staff work to provide each student with the support he/she needs to be successful. All five of the administrators involved in my study described similar efforts to monitor and support students, and to individualize learning, at their schools. These findings are supported by the research of Rosenbaum and Becker (2011) who found that teachers and other staff at ECHSs are often involved in monitoring and supporting students. Likewise, Haxton et al. (2016) reported findings from their impact study revealed ECHSs provide personalized supports for students, including tutoring, help with study skills, and advising. Copland and Boatright (2004) found that effective principals in

small schools focused on relationships, promoted personalization, supported collaboration, and worked to ensure each student's success.

Servant leadership. Both Brian Thorpe and Carol Foust described their philosophy of leadership as based in servant leadership. The other principals did not specifically reference servant leadership in the interviews, but several of the behaviors and strategies that were common to all five principals reflect the influence of servant leadership, such as:

- Building trusting relationships;
- Being supportive and empowering others;
- Caring;
- Establishing and promoting a shared vision;
- Working collaboratively and engaging others in decision-making processes

(Taylor et al., 2007).

Relationships. As discussed in the previous section, the principals and/or their colleagues shared that relationships are a focus of each principal's leadership. In addition to emphasizing relationships with students, these principals worked to establish strong, trusting relations with teachers and other staff. Brian Thorpe shared that he felt his ability to forge relationships is one of his strengths which contributes to his success and to the success of EECHS. Clark (2011) reported that teachers perceive a positive school climate in schools where the principal demonstrates servant leadership characteristics focused on people.

Supporting and empowering others. Frank Vernon, Brian Thorpe, and Heather Dalton all expressed their perception that they work to support and empower the teachers they lead. Vernon mentioned that his efforts are to empower teachers as leaders to eventually take his place. Likewise, Thorpe believed that his work to enable teachers to assume leadership roles contributed to improved teaching and learning, which impacted student success at EECHS. Dalton's colleague, Harold Kennedy, noted that Dalton desired to empower others to do their job well and she was there to provide support and guidance. Carter (2012) reported similar findings, specifically that ECHS principals are inclusive, and worked to empower others. Clark (2011) also found that principals who are perceived as practicing servant leadership demonstrate support for their teachers and work to help them improve their practice.

Caring. Carol Foust's colleague, Mary Daniel, emphasized the caring nature of Foust. According to Daniel, the students at WECHS respond positively to Foust's demonstrations of caring and concern. As previously discussed, Foust routinely spent her own money to purchase meal cards at the college cafeteria and to keep snacks on hand for students because her school does not provide meals for students. Daniel explained that the students understand Foust cares for them, and Daniel felt that impacts the success of the students and the school. Like Daniel, the colleagues of the other four principals expressed that they felt their principals demonstrated concern and compassion, both expressions of caring, towards students as well as the teachers and others. The Center for Servant Leadership (n.d.) and Page and Wong (2000) have identified caring as a characteristic that defines servant leadership.

Establishing and promoting a shared vision. The Center for Servant Leadership (n.d.) includes ‘visionary’ as a characteristic that defines servant leaders. In this study, several principals and their colleagues explained that promoting a shared vision for their schools was a behavior/strategy utilized by the principals. Barbara York emphasized Frank Vernon’s capacity to promote the school’s vision, and gain support and buy-in for the shared vision as one of Vernon’s strengths in leading SECHS to success. Carter (2012) found that the ECHS principals in his study were effective at articulating a clear vision for their schools and gaining the support of others. Peters (2011) found that principals of small school programs must be able to articulate a clear vision of their school to others while maintaining fidelity to the concept.

Collaboration and shared decision-making. Everett, Thorpe, Dalton, Vernon, and Foust all perceived themselves to be collaborative leaders who work with teachers to improve the school and to promote student success. Their colleagues expressed the same perceptions about their leaders. One interesting finding of this study was that all five schools had an inclusive school leadership team. This team, charged with the tasks of completing the School Improvement Plan (SIP) annually, included every teacher, as well as the guidance counselor and principal, and parent representatives. The school-based members of the teams discussed the plans often and worked collaboratively to monitor progress toward goals. As a part of the SIP planning process, the teachers participated in decision-making about goals and focus areas for improvement. Patricia Everett noted that with a faculty that consisted of one administrator, one counselor, and only a few teachers, it seemed logical to include everyone on the team. Brian Thorpe shared that he tried using

a traditional approach to the Leadership team initially, with representatives from each content area, but that excluded a small number of individual teachers, and, as Thorpe commented, “it made more sense” to include all teachers. Carol Foust stated that it was simpler to have everyone on the team, so that the plan could be discussed at the end of each faculty meeting as needed. The findings of this study are similar to the findings from research on small schools leadership—leaders of small high school programs share power and decision making authority, and encourage feedback from others (Copland & Boatright, 2004).

The collaboration and shared decision making at the ECHSs was not limited to the leadership team. Harold Kennedy shared that collaboration was a major factor in Heather Dalton’s leadership at CECHS. He felt that Dalton emphasized teamwork, adding, “it’s always a collaborative effort.” Olivia Martin noted that Patricia Everett was very intentional in sharing information with teachers and staff, and engaged them in making decisions for NECHS as well. The colleagues of Frank Vernon, Brian Thorpe, and Carol Foust all mentioned school wide collaboration, with the principal’s involvement, as a strategy used at their schools to support and improve teaching and learning. Rich (2011) found that early college principals intentionally schedule time for teachers and others to collaborate, and they encourage teachers to learn from one another. Cerit (2009) reported that principals who practiced servant leadership were team oriented, working with others, rather than being authoritative and telling others what to do.

Challenges: The Unicorn Effect

While the principals who participated in this study were dedicated to the ECHS concept and talked with enthusiasm about their students, teachers, and staff, they also confided about certain obstacles and problems unique to ECHS. Heather Dalton compared her role as a ECHS principal among traditional high school principals to the experience of a unicorn in a stable full of horses---there are similarities, but there are stark contrasts as well. The challenges and problems which are unique to ECHS cited most frequently by the principals and their colleagues included:

- Isolation/lack of support;
- Misconceptions about the ECHSI and early college students;
- Equity issues: meals, access to student services support personnel, transportation;
- The closing of NCNS and impact on partner schools.

Isolation/Lack of Support

During the interviews, each principal commented on his/her unique situation as the sole leader of a ECHS in the school district. While there are districts in North Carolina and other states that have multiple ECHS programs, the schools served by the five principals included in this study were the solitary ECHS in their respective districts. As a result, the principals explained that they often feel isolated. Four of the five principals also discussed their concern with the lack of support available to them and for their schools from district officials. The consensus among the study participants was that district officials were not knowledgeable about the ECHS Initiative, and the lack of

understanding often created obstacles for the principals. Carol Foust noted that she viewed herself as a consultant at district level meetings because much of what is discussed does not work at her school or must be modified. Frank Vernon commented that being the administrator at SECHS is “lonely, because nobody understands except other early college principals . . . the district doesn’t understand.”

Misconceptions

A common obstacle identified by principals and colleagues that was prevalent in the communities served by their schools were varied misconceptions regarding the ECHS concept and the students who attend these schools. As Patricia Everett explained, she sometimes felt district officials and other principals perceived that her role was ‘easy’ and that she did not have to work as hard as other school administrators because the student body at NECHS was small compared to traditional high schools. She commented:

they assume that all the kids do what they’re supposed to do, and they all make A’s and B’s . . . that all the kids are perfect angels and they sit in class waiting anxiously to do exactly what the teacher tells them to do . . . and that’s not reality.

Heather Dalton expressed similar frustrations regarding common misconceptions about CECHS. She explained that she often felt that other administrators discounted the effort required by her teachers and staff to support students so that they achieve at high levels. She noted, “they assume we take the top ten from every other high school...but we don’t.” Both Everett and Dalton also shared that they experienced a lack of support when they became principal at their schools. According to Everett, “when I started here, I

realized that they don't understand the concept . . . this is not a negative comment about our district, but no one could help me."

Equity Issues

Carol Foust and other principals described unique issues that impacted their schools and were issues of equity for the school districts. At WECHS, students were not offered breakfast or lunch through the school district's child nutrition program, even if they qualified for free or reduced price meals. Foust explained that when the school was originally organized, there was a lack of sufficient facilities for serving meals. In addition, because WECHS is located on a community college campus, the school district had no legal obligation to offer meals to the students. As a result, the students at WECHS do not have equal access to a school-based program for breakfast and lunch. Foust noted that most students brought their lunch, and she personally provided meals to students who needed assistance on a regular basis. Similarly, at CECHS, students were not eligible for bus transportation after their second year in the program. Dalton explained that the district's limited shuttle bus service operated at fixed times, and after the sophomore year, the college classes offered to CECHS students were often scheduled at times that conflicted with the bus schedule. As a result, students had to provide their own transportation, which was sometimes a hardship to students and families.

In light of the fact that the schools in this study recruit students who are often from disadvantaged backgrounds, these issues of equity should be viewed from a social justice perspective. None of the principals explicitly referenced the social justice lens when discussing these specific challenges or how they worked to solve or address them.

This is an area that warrants further attention, given the implied social justice stance in the ECHS Initiative and concept as originally articulated by JFF and the Gates Foundation.

NCNS Closed

The sudden announcement in late April 2016 that NCNS was closing caught all partner school administrators, teachers, and district officials by surprise. All of the principals and their colleagues described a beneficial relationship between their schools and the organization. Brian Thorpe and Patricia Everett both felt their schools had a positive, collaborative relationship with NCNS, and that NCNS provided helpful instructional coaching and professional development for teachers as well as a network that connected ECHSs across the state. Dalton and her colleague, Harold Kennedy, explained that the instructional coaching provided by NCNS was a key to assimilating new teachers and staff to the design principles and the instructional practices unique to ECHS. Several principals shared concern about the impact of the sudden closing of NCNS, especially the loss of the professional development and instructional coaching that they believed contributed significantly to the school's ability to successfully meet the needs of the students. Frank Vernon was apprehensive about how the lack of a unifying organization would ultimately impact ECHS programs across the state. He confided that partnerships with NCNS were important for ECHSs, especially when the schools were initially being organized and in the first years of operation. In addition, Vernon explained that the ability to network with other ECHS principals afforded by NCNS would be a significant loss. In general, the principals expressed uncertainty and apprehension, since

at the time that the research for this study was being conducted, the NCDPI had not yet announced a plan for providing support or guidance to the ECHS programs in lieu of what had previously been provided by NCNS. Fear of the unknown was a general concern shared by the participants in this study.

Implications

This study explored the perceptions of ECHS principals and their colleagues about the principals' leadership practices. Specifically, I sought to understand how ECHS principals balance the demands and expectations of the school district and the partnering college with the daily responsibilities of leading a high school situated on a community college campus, and to examine the principals' behaviors and strategies that they and/or their colleagues perceived to have a positive impact on student achievement and the graduation rate at their schools. My research contributes to the growing body of literature related to ECHS programs, and helps fill the void in that literature specifically related to the principals who lead these schools.

The findings from my research and a review of existing literature suggest that the role of ECHS principal is as unique as the innovative school he/she leads. While these principals may be responsible for far fewer students than a traditional high school administrator supervises, they face obstacles and challenges that principals in traditional schools rarely encounter. Given that the ECHS is essentially one model of a small, innovative high school based on the small schools movement model, it is not surprising that much of the research about small schools and leading small schools applies to the ECHS concept and the principals in my study. However, I think it is important to note

that the ECHS is more than a small high school on a community college campus. The ECHS is set apart because of the unique partnership between the school district and the college partner that is forged to create each school. Another unique characteristic of the ECHS is the fact that all students are required to take and successfully complete college courses, taught by regular college faculty, as a part of their course load towards completing requirements for both their high school diploma and a college degree. Thus, the principal of the ECHS must negotiate with the college faculty and administration on a regular basis, as a part of the college community, and as a partner in getting the ECHS students to success. As a result, the ECHS principalship is also not just another small school principalship, despite the similarities between their school models.

The data gleaned from my research suggest that ECHS principals must be intentional in working with the district and the college partner if they are to balance the myriad demands associated with their role. The following implications for current or aspiring ECHS principals are supported by the findings:

- The ECHS principal must be an advocate for his/her school in working with the school district so that mandates that do not support the ECHS concept or that are impossible to implement in the ECHS setting are not forced down by district administrators who do not understand and/or do not embrace the ECHS model.
- The ECHS principal must be an advocate for his/her school in working with the college partner to gain support and cooperation from the college administration and the instructors that work directly with ECHS students.

- Establishing effective channels of communication with both the school district and the college partner is imperative to promote the collaboration necessary for sustaining a successful ECHS partnership.
- With few teachers, one guidance counselor, and no other support staff, ECHS principals must be flexible and take on additional roles/responsibilities beyond those associated with the traditional role of the principal.
- Because the ECHS recruits and serves students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including students from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, and other at-risk groups of students, the ECHS principal should be intentionally aware of his/her responsibility to act as a socially just leader who actively promotes socially just schools for all students.

Several implications for school districts also emerged from the research. Specifically, district administrators should work to cultivate a better understanding of the ECHS concept and design across the district in order to dispel common misconceptions about the program and the students who attend ECHS. There is also a need for districts to develop and provide differentiated support to ECHS principals. My study found that ECHS principals felt isolated by the lack of support available at the district level. In addition, several principals cited equity issues as a major obstacle for their schools, which should be addressed at the district level. Since most ECHSs serve students from across the entire school district, a lack of bus transportation may be an obstacle for students who would otherwise attend the school. Similarly, students at ECHS should have the same

access to meals provided by the district child nutrition program as their peers who attend traditional schools. Access to trained student support staff is also important for ECHS students. The fact that the school is located on a college campus or that the students take college classes does not diminish the need for students to have support from a nurse, social worker, school psychologist or other student support personnel that routinely serve students in traditional schools. These are just a few examples of issues unique to ECHS programs which require district leadership attention to be resolved.

For colleges that are a part of an ECHS partnership, the findings from this study suggest there is a need to educate instructors and staff who work with the program about the ECHS concept, the school model, and the design principles. Likewise, college instructors may benefit from professional development about working with young adolescents as opposed to older, traditional college students. Better communication between the college instructors and the ECHS faculty would benefit students and contribute to the continued success of ECHS programs.

This study revealed several behaviors and strategies the participating principals utilize that were perceived to improve teaching and learning and to positively influence both student achievement and the graduation rate. The study revealed that the ECHS principals were student-centered leaders who also demonstrated several behaviors of servant leadership. Current and aspiring ECHS principals may find the intentional use of one or more of these practices to have a positive impact in their schools as well:

- Build and maintain relationships with students as well as teachers and staff;
- Encourage and support teachers in the use of innovative, creative instructional strategies;
- Establish and clearly communicate high expectations;
- Promote personalized learning;
- Work collaboratively with teachers and staff to monitor student progress and provide support to students as needed;
- Empower teachers to grow professionally and become leaders;
- Establish and communicate a shared vision;
- Share leadership and engage others in decision-making processes.

While the data revealed these behaviors and strategies were commonly used by ECHS principals, they are not unique to the ECHS context. Principals in traditional schools may also find benefit from implementing any of these practices.

Recommendations for Further Study

The number of ECHS programs continues to grow as school districts and institutions of higher education partner to develop programs that promote greater access to college for first generation, traditionally underrepresented, and/or economically disadvantaged students (Miller et al., 2013). The last decade has seen the rapid growth of a body of literature about these innovative high schools. The current study contributes to the literature by providing insights regarding the behaviors and strategies implemented by ECHS principals in leading their schools. The findings revealed that the principals worked closely and collaboratively with teachers. Additional research that explores the

teaching and learning strategies used by ECHS teachers might provide further insights as to other factors that contribute to the success of these schools. My study was limited to five white principals. A similar study that includes more participants and a more diverse group might provide additional perspectives from which to explore the best practices of ECHS principals. Similarly, my study was limited to ECHS principals in North Carolina. Since the ECHS Initiative was a nationwide reform effort, similar studies that include principals from other states would also enrich the body of research.

Conclusion

This qualitative, multi-site case study examined the behaviors and strategies practiced by ECHS principals that they and their colleagues perceived to have a positive impact. The study included five ECHS principals and five colleagues from five different school districts in North Carolina. This study contributes to the body of literature on the ECHS concept, specifically regarding the principals who lead these schools. The results of the study reveal that ECHS principals are intentional leaders who work collaboratively to create student-centered schools. In addition, the principals in this study were relationship-driven, and sought to empower teachers to become leaders. As the ECHS concept is currently receiving a new wave of attention from policy makers and educators across the nation, it is imperative to identify the best practices of the principals who lead successful ECHS programs and to share their stories with those who aspire to improve teaching and learning.

Final Thoughts

In the first chapter of this study, I used an analogy about *the Wizard of Oz* to describe how it feels to be the principal of RECHS. Ironically, the findings of a study by Garza et al. (2014) seem to support that analogy. Much like the lion, the tin man, and the scarecrow from Oz, they described successful principals as courageous, caring, and intelligent leaders. Frank Vernon may have summed it up best when he noted, “it’s not rocket science . . . but it is hard work.” The work of all school administrators is important work, and those who do it well deserve to tell their stories in hopes of helping others.

I think the work of the ECHS principal is neither more important nor more effective than the leadership of any other principals in any other schools. However, after several years on the job, I am more convinced than ever that the voices of ECHS principals should be heard, especially those of us who work in schools where the graduation rate is above average and all students achieve at a high level. Given the target populations we recruit, understanding how we lead our schools may be helpful to other principals, not just those of us in the ECHS setting.

I ventured to do this study because I wanted to learn from my peers. I can say without hesitation that I have learned from each principal who was willing to share his/her practice with me. I have already implemented and adapted some of the practices and strategies that I learned through the research process at my school. We are utilizing more technology as a means of monitoring students, and we are having intentional conversations about social justice issues that impact our school and our students, because I have realized that is what we need to do. I am not sure I would have come to that

realization had I not completed this study. So, I not only grew as a researcher and student, but as a principal. I am thankful that I was finally able to complete this work, and I acknowledge that I did not get here alone.

As an early college high school principal, I can relate to each of the principals who generously opened his/her practice up to me and allowed me to look around inside his/her school. I can relate to Patricia Everett's concerns about students who need access to a computer to complete school assignments, but there are no computers in their homes. Like Brian Thorpe, I have struggled with student discipline and safety issues on the college campus, only to be surprised at the disconnect between the college's policies and those that dictate how I must respond as a high school principal. Like Heather Dalton, at times I have felt isolated and concerned that the administrators at the district level often do not understand what I do, nor how I do it. I understand Carol Foust's frustration when her students do not have transportation to and from school, or when they are hungry and need a meal. Finally, like Frank Vernon, I can relate to so many of my students who are first-generation college students, because in them I see myself.

I was not surprised by the work ethic or the passion displayed by the ECHS principals and their colleagues. The teachers, counselors, principals, liaisons, and other staff at ECHSs are some of the hardest working educators I've ever met. It is no surprise that turnover is often high in this setting, for both teachers and principals. However, I was surprised to find that servant leadership was the intent of at least two of the participants in this study, and characteristics of servant leadership were displayed by all of the principals. I have never considered myself to be a servant leader, but after talking with

these principals, and doing research about the philosophy, I intend to consider this leadership paradigm more often in my work.

If I had to complete this entire process again, I cannot say with certainty that I would even begin. I started the Ed.S./Ed.D. program before I became the principal of RECHS. Had I realized the difference serving at a ECHS would mean for me, I do not know that I would have taken the position midway through a graduate program. It has been a struggle to complete my work and serve my school at the same time. On the other hand, if I actually had to do this study again, I would try to include more principals, from every region of the state. I cannot explain how much I have learned in the process of doing this work. So, despite the time and commitment that's been required, I feel it has been worth it.

My sincere hope is that at least one novice ECHS principal will find this, read it, and get something useful from it. I cannot help but believe it would have been beneficial to me six years ago if this type of research had been more accessible when I became principal at RECHS.

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APPENDIX A

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Diane Hill and I am a student from the Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about Principal Leadership of Early College High School programs. This study is a multi-site case study about the skills and knowledge used by early college high school principals in leading their schools. You're eligible to be a participant in this study because you are the current or former principal in an early college high school that has a 95% or better graduation rate and/or has a school performance grade of A for the 2014-2015 school year.

Participation in this study would involve one face to face interview with me, the researcher, which would be 45-90 minutes in length. I would like to audio record your interview and will then use the information to assist me in identifying the skills and knowledge used by principals leading highly successful early college programs. The audiotaped interview would be kept confidential and would only be shared with the transcription service provider contracted to transcribe the interviews for this study. I will provide you with the file of the transcribed interview and will ask you to review the file for accuracy.

In addition, I will ask you to identify one person at your school with whom you work closely who will also be asked to participate in the study by being interviewed. Both you and the other person from your school must participate in order for your school to be one of the sites included in the case study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at dshill@uncg.edu. Additionally, I will have consent forms on site when I visit your school for interviews.

If I do not hear from you within 10 days of sending this letter, I will follow up with you by email. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Diane S. Hill

dshill@uncg.edu

336.214.1512

Approved IRB
2/19/16

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Diane Hill and I am a student from the Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations Department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about Principal Leadership of Early College High School programs. This study is a multi-site case study about the skills and knowledge used by early college high school principals in leading their schools. You're eligible to be a participant in this study because your principal (or former principal) has identified you as someone who works/has worked closely with him/her in an early college high school that has a 95% or better graduation rate and/or has a school performance grade of A for the 2014-2015 school year.

Participation in this study would involve one face to face interview with me, the researcher, which would be 45-90 minutes in length. I would like to audio record your interview and will then use the information to assist me in identifying the skills and knowledge used by principals leading highly successful early college programs. The audiotaped interview would be kept confidential and would only be shared with the transcription service provider contracted to transcribe the interviews for this study. I will provide you with the file of the transcribed interview and will ask you to review the file for accuracy.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at dshill@uncg.edu. Additionally, I will have consent forms on site when I visit your school for interviews.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Diane S. Hill

dshill@uncg.edu

336.214.1512

Approved IRB

2/19/16

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL

To: Diane Hill
Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found
712 Colonial Drive

From: UNCG IRB

Date: 2/16/2016

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption

Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation,4.Existing data, public or deidentified

Study #: 15-0517

Study Title: Early College High School Leadership: A Closer Look

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Study Description:

This multi-site case study will examine the perceptions of early college high school principals regarding how they lead their schools. The study will focus on what leadership skills and knowledge early college high school principals report using in their daily work as leaders of cooperative, innovative high schools. The voice of early college leaders and those who know them well will be the primary focus of this study.

Regulatory and other findings:

- If your study is contingent upon approval from another site (school districts), you will need to submit a modification at the time you receive that approval.

Investigator's Responsibilities

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. Please utilize the most recent and approved version of your consent form/information sheet when enrolling participants. The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

Signed letters, along with stamped copies of consent forms and other recruitment materials will be scanned to you in a separate email. **Stamped consent forms must be used unless the IRB has given you approval to waive this requirement.** Please notify the ORI office immediately if you have an issue with the stamped consents forms.

Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/.

CC:

Ulrich Reitzug, Ed Ldrship and Cultural Found